







**CHRIS**

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# CHRIS

BY

W. E. NORRIS

AUTHOR OF "MY FRIEND JIM," ETC.

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# CHRIS.

## CHAPTER I.

CHRISTINA COMPTON sat upon the low garden wall of the villa which her father had taken at Cannes for the winter, and dangled her legs contentedly in the sunshine. Behind her was the garden, which was but a modest garden, and the villa, which, though modest enough in point of size, commanded anything but a modest rent ; for the great world has long since marked Cannes for its own, and modesty of any kind would be out of place under such distinguished patronage.

Some disagreeable people might even assert that a certain lack of modesty was displayed by a young lady of seventeen, who chose to perch herself upon a wall overlooking the high road ; but Chris as yet knew nothing of disagreeable

people, or the disagreeable things that they are wont to say to and of one another. The world to her was a pleasant place, and its inhabitants a friendly and joyous set of beings, most of whom, so far as her faculties of observation (which were considerable) had enabled her to judge, had little to do but to amuse themselves, and who seemed to do that pretty successfully, upon the whole. For her own part, she had always amused herself very well indeed, and now that her education was considered to be completed and she was emancipated from the control of schoolmistresses and music-masters, she had nothing left to wish for, except the not far-distant day when, as she supposed, she would be presented to her Sovereign, and would take an active part in those London gaieties of which she had heard so much from her friends.

Meanwhile, she was very well satisfied to remain a child for a few months longer, and to enjoy the privileges of childhood, chief among which was that of doing exactly what she pleased at all times and in all circumstances. Young ladies who have been presented at Court and introduced to London society are not, she had been given to understand, quite so free as that. For the moment it was her good pleasure

to seat herself upon the wall aforesaid, and bask in the sunshine, and survey the glittering blue bay beneath her and the red-roofed houses of the old town, huddled together on their promontory, and the sharp, jagged outlines of the mountains beyond. Beside her sat her little Yorkshire terrier, Peter, who did not personally care much about sitting upon a wall, except in so far as it gave him an opportunity of descrying any cat who might dare to show her face in the vicinity, but who knew his place better than to raise objections to any method of passing the time selected by his mistress.

It was only half-past ten o'clock in the morning, so that Cannes, in the fashionable sense of the word, was hardly awake yet. Fashionable Cannes had been to a ball the night before, and would not show its nose out of doors for another hour and a half at least ; but Chris had many friends who did not belong to the fashionable class, and presently one after another of these came tramping along the dusty road and stopped to speak to her. The first to arrive was José, the Spanish pedlar, in his velvet jacket, with that striped rug flung over his shoulder, which Chris always wished that somebody would buy, if only to relieve him of the nuisance of carrying it.

Indeed, this was such a hot morning that when he came to a standstill beside her, and showed his white teeth and raised his hand to his round cap, as usual, she declared that she would buy it herself, only she hadn't got any money left.

José said that was of no consequence at all: the *senorita* could pay him some day—any day. At the same time, he really could not recommend the rug. Such things were all very well for mere tourists, but for persons who really knew the value of beautiful work, like the *señorita*, they were scarcely suitable. He had some lace, now, which was truly exquisite. And forthwith he placed his oblong box upon the wall and began to display his treasures.

But Chris did not want any lace. She had plenty of it, packed away, "which used to belong to my mother," she explained, "and which I suppose I shall begin to wear next year." What she really would like would be one of the enormous clasp-knives, which formed a portion of José's stock-in-trade.

José, however, shook his head decisively. Knives, said he, were not for young ladies, who would only cut their fingers with them. For men they were useful—and he proceeded to point out how a man might be called upon

to make use of them—but it must not be said that he had provided the *señorita* with the means of inflicting an ugly wound upon herself.

“Very well,” answered Chris, drawing her feet on to the top of the wall, clasping her hands round her legs and resting her chin upon her knees, “then we won’t buy or sell to-day. Tell me about the bull-fights at Seville.”

So José quickly rolled up a cigarette between his brown fingers, lighted it, and embarked in his broken French upon a descriptive narration which he had made many times before, and which never failed to excite both him and his hearer as it went on. Chris, who loved all animals, was never quite sure that she ought not to feel sorry for the poor bull; but then, as José pointed out to her, the bull had a noble fight for it, which he could not help enjoying, and which he probably did not expect to terminate in his death: added to which, his death, when it came, was a swift one, while it occasionally happened that he killed or maimed his most formidable antagonist. As for the part which the horses played in the show, José passed lightly over that. It was not pretty, he admitted, but it was necessary.

Nobody, not even Frascuelo himself, could fight a perfectly fresh and untired bull. Besides, it was the custom of the country, just as it was the custom in the *señorita's* country, he had been told, to let a whole pack of hounds, tear a fox to pieces.

After a time, José shouldered his rug and his box of rubbish, and strolled off on his daily round to the villas of those opulent-foreigners with whom it was alike his business and his pleasure to haggle; but he was soon replaced by other wayfarers. The company of Italian minstrels and singers, who troll out the same songs in every city of the peninsula from Naples to Venice, and who turn aside in the winter season to reap their share of the golden harvest of the Riviera: the beggars who managed to pick up a livelihood by soliciting alms even in a department where mendicity is prohibited: the slouching *sergent de ville*, who pretended not to see their illegal proceedings: the man who sold hot chestnuts—as though any human being could want to eat hot chestnuts on such a morning!—these and many others passed the spot where Miss Compton had taken up her station, and halted to wish her good-day and answer the quick questions that she put to them about themselves and their belongings.

She knew each of them by name: she had a few *sous* for the beggars and a kindly word for everybody. In return, she received plenty of those direct and unequivocal compliments which fall naturally from the lips of Southern people, and which were probably as sincere as they were outspoken.

Whether Chris Compton was a pretty girl or not was a moot point among women, most of whom, to tell the truth, were inclined to decide that she was not. Her features, to be sure, were not regular: her nose was too short: her eyes, though bright, were not particularly large: when you had said that she had a neat figure, a good complexion, and that her dark hair, with bronze lights in it here and there, was well enough in its way, you had said about all that there was to be said for her. But these were feminine criticisms. No masculine mind had ever doubted the obvious fact of her beauty, though the masculine intellect might not be equal to the task of defining in what it consisted. And so her humble friends did not hesitate to tell her that she was as beautiful as the morning, which statement was listened to without any embarrassment upon her part. Some of them snapped their fingers amiably at Peter, who, however, only responded by a

sort of snort, and by gazing over their heads ; for Peter was a good deal more exclusive than his mistress, and tolerated no familiarities from social inferiors.

But at length a pedestrian hove in sight whom this haughty terrier deemed worthy of more cordial demonstrations of regard. He cocked his little brown ears, he wagged his stump of a tail excitedly : finally he leapt down from the wall, and scurried along the road to greet the new comer, whirling past him and approaching him by a series of narrowing circles, as his habit was when under the sway of pleasurable emotion. He was a dog of immense discrimination ; but the most discriminating of dogs and men make mistakes sometimes, and a keen observer might have fancied that Peter was making a little mistake in this instance. Because, somehow or other, the very handsome young man upon whose trousers he was leaving the imprints of his dusty paws did not look quite like a gentleman. It was not that the young man was badly dressed—he was, if anything, rather too well dressed : it was not that there was anything particular in his gait or bearing that could be said to denote vulgarity ; but there was a subdued suggestion of swagger about him, an air

of assurance which only those assume who are not sure of themselves; and when he opened his lips there was no longer any doubt about the matter, for his voice was not a gentleman's voice.

But these details, which did not attract everybody's notice, are merely mentioned here for the guidance of the reader. Mr. Valentine Richardson was admitted into the society of gentlemen, and was to most intents and purposes one of them. He was, moreover, extremely good-looking, tall, dark, well put together, and using his limbs with the easy grace of an athlete. His age might be two-and-twenty or thereabouts. Such natural advantages cannot but help a man on the road towards popularity; and as for Peter, he was in a manner bound to do homage to Mr. Richardson. Some acknowledgment, surely, is due to the benefactor who has bought you out of the thralldom of a dog-dealer's restricted premises and presented you to the kindest mistress in the world. After all, Peter may have had mental reservations which he was too loyal to reveal.

"Well, Chris," said Mr. Richardson, taking off his hat—and though he took his hat off, he did so with an exaggerated flourish which robbed the action of its courtesy—"up early, as usual, I see."

Chris had imitated Peter and had slid off the wall. She now stood with her back against it, resting her elbows on the coping.

"Early!" she exclaimed scornfully. "Why, it is close upon the middle of the day! I have been up for the last five hours."

"After having been in bed for the previous nine, eh? I have had to make the best of four hours' sleep, and yet here I am, as fresh as a daisy. So if you come to that, I think I have about as good a right to brag as you have."

"Were you dancing last night, then?"

"I grieve to say that I was less healthily employed. Went over to Monte Carlo with some fellows and won a hundred louis. Came back by the last train, and proceeded to lose them, together with another hundred odd to keep them company. Such is life!"

"Such is the life which certain people choose to lead. I call it very silly of them," observed Chris severely.

"Hear, hear! I am quite of your opinion, my dear Chris—especially when I lose. Only I haven't the courage of my convictions, as you have. You are a good girl, you see, whereas I am a very bad boy."

"If you go on in this way you will be

ruined," continued Chris. "I have heard more than one person say so lately."

"How kind of more than one person to take such an interest in poor me! But so great is my ingratitude that I don't care a little bit what more than one person in Cannes may think or say about me; and I do hope that that one person isn't going to be so unkind as to scold me on a nice fine morning like this—after I have risen with the lark on purpose to see her too!"

"Oh, I am not scolding you, Mr. Richardson: of course, if you like to ruin yourself, you can."

"And 'Mr. Richardson,' if you please! This is becoming serious."

"I am not going to call you 'Val' any more," Chris announced, with a very slight increase of colour. "Lady Barnstaple says it doesn't sound nice."

"Lady Barnstaple be hanged! Is she one of the amiable creatures who foretell my ruin? Anyhow, I don't see why she should be an infallible judge of what sounds nice. 'Val' may not sound nice to her, but it does to me; and as I'm the person principally concerned—"

"But I quite agree with her," interrupted Chris: "I am getting too old now to call men by their Christian names."

"I don't want you to call any other man by his Christian name; only if you address me as 'Mr. Richardson' again, I shall go away."

"Mr. Richardson," returned Chris with great promptitude.

However, the young man did not carry out his dreadful threat. He perched himself upon the wall instead, and allowed the question of nomenclature to fall into abeyance, and chattered away volubly and rather amusingly for a quarter of an hour. His talk was chiefly of himself and his various exploits and experiences, which seemed to have been of a striking nature.

To one of his own sex such a style of conversation would very soon have become intolerable; but it is to be feared that Miss Compton did not find it so. The man was really something of a hero in a physical sense. He was a fair rider, a first-rate swimmer, and the best lawn-tennis player in Cannes, which advantages, added to his youth and beauty, were perhaps sufficient to excuse the admiration of a girl of seventeen. Nor were even his vices, so far as she was acquainted with them, of the kind which young people are prone to condemn unsparingly.

He went away at last, remarking that he would be late for a breakfast-party at which

he had promised to be present ; and before he was out of sight, a small, delicate-looking man, very thin, very pale, with large, bright brown eyes and a carefully-trimmed beard and moustache, in which a few grey hairs were visible, emerged from the villa and stepped slowly across the garden. Chris, who had been standing in the road, scrambled over the wall and ran to meet this new arrival, whom she kissed on both cheeks.

"How are you this morning, father?" she asked. "Still tired?"

"I am still tired," replied Mr. Compton, with a slight smile. "I am always tired: I presume that I always shall be tired to the end of the chapter. It is a sensation to which one grows accustomed in the long run." He paused for a moment, and then asked: "Was that young Richardson whom you were talking to?"

Chris nodded.

"Oh! Well do you know, Chris, I think you had better not talk any more to young Richardson. Not in private, I mean. He is—well, rather a young cad."

"Oh, I don't think he is that!" cried Chris, with a touch of indignation.

"No: you wouldn't. Otherwise, you would hardly care to talk to him. But he appears

to me to be a cad. Disreputable too, or on the verge of it. And nobody knows anything about him. We had perhaps better let him drop. Not with a thump, you know, but just let him drop gently."

Mr. Compton had a slow, languid method of enunciation. He spoke in short sentences, with a pause and something like a gasp for breath between each. Evidently he was not much interested in Mr. Richardson, perhaps not very much in his daughter either, for he did not seem even to hear a murmured protest on her part. Presently he asked, "Will you be seeing the Laverignes to-day?"

"Yes," answered Chris. "I thought of breakfasting with them, if you were going out. I suppose you *are* going out?"

"Oh, of course," returned her father, with a short laugh. "When don't I go out?—and when don't I wish to goodness that I could stay at home! I have to lunch at the Duchess of Islay's, which is an unspeakable bore. One always meets a host of people in that house, and one is lucky if one gets away by four o'clock. I was going to say that if you see Lavergne, you might ask him to look in upon me when he has nothing else to do. To-morrow morning, perhaps. Tell him I have one or

two more things to say to him about the—subject we were talking of the other day.”

At this moment one of the small open carriages which ply for hire at Cannes turned in at the gates of the villa, and Mr. Compton, with a farewell wave of his hand to his daughter, stepped into it and was driven away to the ducal festivity. There had been a time when lunching or dining with duchesses had been delightful to him; but that time had gone by. Who cares for what he can always get? Now that he was upon the farther side of middle age, Percival Compton was well known to, and even sought after by, those duchesses, marchionesses, and other inferior luminaries who, with their friends and belongings, may perhaps be called the pleasantest people in England, and who (making allowance for variety of individual taste) are, at all events, generally considered to lead English society. This distinction he owed no doubt primarily to his being a poet, a musician, and a novelist, but also in no small degree to his charming manners. He was not, as he was very well aware, a great poet, or a great musician, or a great novelist; but the combination of the three gifts is not exactly common, and as he had contrived to take the taste of his generation, he earned without much

exertion a considerable annual income—which he spent. Left a widower in early life, he had only one daughter, so that he might be said to enjoy the advantages of domesticity without paying the customary high price for them ; and indeed he was spoken of with envy by most of his artistic superiors and equals as an example of a perfectly successful and happy man. However, he had bad health ; and that spoilt all. There are no earthly compensations for bad health ; and perhaps Mr. Compton had not troubled his head very much about compensations with which this world has nothing to do. It was not his habit to trouble his head about anything more than he could help. But how can you possibly help worrying yourself a little when you are quite sure that you have got heart-disease, when your entire invested fortune does not bring you in more than three hundred pounds a year, and when you have a daughter who has been accustomed to live at the rate of something like three thousand ?

The thought of his daughter and her future was beginning to be a serious worry to Mr. Compton. Like everybody else's daughters, she had grown up with amazing rapidity : yesterday she had been a child, to-day she was a young woman, or close upon it. He

realised what many people have a difficulty in realising, that the present belongs to the young : he perceived that his little girl was a personage, a more important personage, possibly, than himself—and she would only have three hundred a year, and his heart was certainly all wrong. His heart, in a metaphorical sense, was not very far wrong. He was a kindly, selfish, easy-going mortal who had never willingly injured any one, if he had never exerted himself very much to do any one a service. As for his daughter, he really knew remarkably little about her. He had gone his way—a pleasant, busy way, what with his literary avocations, and his social engagements, and his wanderings from one continental watering-place to another—and she had gone hers. He had taken care that she should be furnished with the best of French masters, music-masters, riding-masters, and so forth : the duchesses and the other great ladies had been very kind : she had associated freely with their children, and he had noted with satisfaction that she had caught the tone and ways of good society. Thus he had discharged his parental duties, or had left them to discharge themselves ; and now, as it seemed, the day of reckoning was in sight. Had it been altogether prudent to

throw his daughter so much with great people and to let her suppose, as she evidently did, that her lot was likely to be identical with theirs? Really he was not sure. No one knew better than he the value of such friendships as she had made: no one knew better that, in all ranks of society, out of sight is apt to be synonymous with out of mind. When Lady Barnstaple asked who was going to present Chris next year, and hinted that she would be willing to bring her out with her own daughter, he understood that half promises of that kind were not to be counted upon. Yet the girl must have made friends of one description or another, and it was surely better that her friends should be ladies than not. He did not feel that he had done so badly for her in that respect. Undoubtedly, however, he ought to have saved more money.

These things he reflected on while sitting at the Duchess of Islay's luncheon table, and saying the neat and clever things which he was expected to say, and which (being in an unwontedly bitter mood) he represented to himself as the price that he was paying for his food.

Chris, meanwhile, whose friends, as we have already seen, were not all of an aristocratic

order, strolled across the garden and scrambled through an intervening hedge, with the intention of sharing the midday meal of her neighbours, Dr. and Madame Lavergne, who were by no means aristocratic, but on the contrary, severe and convinced Republicans. That is to say, that Dr. Lavergne was a convinced Republican : his wife's convictions resembled those of the wise and unassuming politician who was content to say ditto to Mr. Burke.

## CHAPTER II.

CHRIS was a very small person, so that she could creep through a privet hedge without doing it any serious damage ; but if she had not been also a privileged person, her diminutive size would hardly have saved her from the wrath of Dr. Lavergne, who, advanced Republican though he was, had strict notions with reference to the sacredness of private property.

The property upon which Chris so uncere-  
moniously entered was, indeed, a very different one from that which she had quitted. Mr. Compton's garden was the garden of a hired villa, kept more or less in order by the individual who blacked the boots and cleaned the knives, and boasting little more in the way of flowers than such as had propagated themselves from the seed of former years ; whereas Dr. Lavergne's was the chief pride and the chief

interest of its owner's life. Dr. Lavergne's roses were famous even in that land of roses : he had succeeded in rearing creepers and flowering shrubs which nobody else could rear, and his small domain was at all seasons a model of exquisite neatness. That, no doubt, was because he was his own gardener ; and he was hard at work in his shirt sleeves when Chris came behind him and tapped him familiarly upon the shoulder.

He wheeled round quickly, showing a sharp, smooth-shaven face and a pair of bright black eyes, overshadowed by bushy eyebrows. When he took off his broad-brimmed Panama hat he uncovered a thick head of hair, which was snow-white and closely cropped. At the first glance, and at a short distance, he might have passed for a man of fifty ; but closer inspection made it evident that he must be a great deal older than that ; and in truth he had passed his seventieth birthday, though he was still sound, healthy, and active.

" I am all the more enchanted to see you, *mademoiselle*," said he, " because it is breakfast time, and because I have been told that we are to have a *ragoût aux fèves* to-day. Can you resist a *ragoût aux fèves* ? "

" I came to beg you for something to eat,"

answered Chris. "I don't much care what it is ; but I detest eating alone—don't you ? And my father has gone out to breakfast."

The old man shrugged his shoulders. "It would be an agreeable change for your father," he remarked, "and a wholesome change too, if he were sometimes to breakfast at home. But it is not for me to complain of his absence, since we benefit by it. Is it a princess, or a duchess, or a countess who has the honour of entertaining him to-day ? I will not insult him by suggesting that he would breakfast with a simple commoner—like himself."

Chris, who knew her old friend's prejudices and peculiarities, did not resent the sarcasm. The young are often more ready to make allowances for the old than the old are to do as much for the young. "He has gone to the Duchess of Islay's," she answered ; "and I don't think duchesses are any worse than other people. This one has promised to give me a cutting of her hardenbergia for you."

Dr. Lavergne's eyes glistened. Duchesses may be ridiculous anachronisms, but in a hardenbergia there is solid worth. Besides, as he was something of a philosopher, he reflected that one man has as good a right to his hobby as another. Mr. Compton probably did not

know a hardenbergia from a weed : he himself was unable to detect any important difference between a duchess and a washerwoman. "Let us live and let live!" he ejaculated aloud, as he put on his alpaca coat and led the way towards the house. Then he became grave and silent on a sudden, for his own words had accidentally suggested a melancholy thought to him ; nor did he look any less grave when Chris delivered her father's message.

"I am always at Mr. Compton's orders," he replied a little curtly ; "but I do not know that there is anything more to be said about the subject that he mentions."

Madame Lavergne, a little wizened old woman of that dowdy, yet tidy type of French *bourgeoise* which is so fast disappearing, made Chris sit down beside her on the sofa in the stiffly arranged, uncarpeted *salon*, and held her by the hand while she talked to her. She had a kindly, ugly face, and a high, clear voice, with an occasional quaver in it which may have been the legacy of bygone sorrows. Madame Lavergne had had plenty of sorrows in her life : all her children were now dead : some of them had given her a great deal of trouble and anxiety before dying ; and her husband, though she adored him and believed

him to be the best as well as the wisest of mankind, was not always in a good humour. He was in a good humour to-day, because Chris Compton had come in, and because he had taken a fancy to Chris, who indeed had the gift of making all sorts of people take a fancy to her. Madame Lavergne herself was fond of the motherless girl, and sorry for her, having reasons for being sorry for her with which Chris was not acquainted.

That young lady talked without much intermission during breakfast, saying whatever came into her head, as her habit was ; and when the repast was concluded Peter exhibited his tricks, which were varied and ingenious, to the delight of the old couple, who gave him many more lumps of sugar than were good for him.

"Ah, *mademoiselle*," cried Dr. Lavergne, "how wise you are to choose your friends from among the brute creation ! They are the only true friends. If a horse or a dog loves you once he loves you always : he asks nothing better than to serve you as long as he lives, and he will forgive you for beating him or even starving him. We men and women have a different rule. We inquire of our friends, 'What can you do for us ?'—and supposing that they are

compelled to reply 'Nothing,' we bow, if we are polite, or we make a grimace, if we are impolite, and we promptly retire."

Chris observed that her experience had not been so discouraging. Numbers of people had been very kind to her, and yet it was certain that she could do nothing at all to repay them for their kindness.

But the doctor, who was a pessimist, rejoined: "My child, you do not yet know the race to which you have the honour to belong. For the rest, I am not anxious to enlighten you. Believe in your fellow-creatures as long as you can: you will find out soon enough what they are worth."

Dr. Lavergne had perhaps some excuse for being a pessimist. He had been a Republican, and an injudiciously outspoken one, during the twenty years of the Second Empire: he had been an enthusiast in his profession, and he had met with the fate of most enthusiasts, political and professional. His ideas had triumphed, but he had not triumphed with them, and he was not magnanimous enough or indifferent enough to walk in the triumph of his inferiors. At the age of sixty he had inherited a modest fortune, and had thereupon retired to the south of France to cultivate roses, leaving politics

and medicine to get on as best they could without him. Possibly it may have added to his mortification to notice how little he was missed. In any case, he had become a professed sceptic, believing in nothing, least of all in his own calling, which he declared to be a mere survival of barbarism and superstition. "A surgeon can set your leg for you," he was wont to say; "but the utmost that a physician can do is to tell you what is the matter with you, and even in answering that question he is more often wrong than right." Nevertheless, Dr. Lavergne was a kind-hearted old gentleman, and believed, as sceptics generally do, in a great many things which he pretended to deride.

At three o'clock Chris jumped up and ran away, having an engagement to go out riding with some of her friends; and after she was gone Madame Lavergne said, with a sigh, to her husband, "*Mon ami*, my heart aches for the child. What will become of her?"

"Who knows?" returned the doctor, shrugging his shoulders. "Who knows what will become of any of us?"

"Oh, as for you and me, we know very well. Besides, what does it signify? But she is so young and so happy, and she does not think

about the future at all. It would be a sad misfortune for her if anything were to happen to her father."

"I do not know," observed Doctor Lavergne, frowning, "why women have such a dislike to putting a direct question. One understands what they want, and one is aware that there will be no peace in the house until they have obtained their answer. Well, I will answer you. He consulted me as a friend, and as a friend I told him that he might live another ten years. It was true: he may live ten years. But it is more likely that he will die next week. What would you have? He is a man who does not take care of himself, and now he is frightened. A frightened man is already half dead."

Madame Lavergne sighed again. "I was afraid of it. And what will become of our poor child when she is left alone in the world?"

"Why, then, my dear, she will learn what human nature and human friendship are worth. It is a lesson which all of us must learn sooner or later; and I say that she will learn it then because her father gave me to understand that he would only have a small fortune to bequeath to her."

"I hope, at least," said Madame Lavergne,

after a pause, "that she will not be disappointed in our friendship." Whereupon the doctor laughed and went back to his roses.

Before condemning human friendship at large as untrustworthy, it would be as well to understand clearly what is meant by the expression ; because some injustice would be done towards those who, in the kindness of their hearts, help us over a stile to-day, if they were to be denounced as traitors for failing to be upon the spot in order to pluck us out of a quicksand to-morrow. Those who are disappointed in their fellow-creatures are generally those who expect more than they have any business to expect. As for Chris, she had as yet had no occasion to ask herself whether her fair-weather friends would remain constant to her in adversity or not. She liked them for their own sake, and supposed that they liked her for hers—which, indeed, was the truth. There was Lady Barnstaple, for instance, who had often told her as much in so many words. Lady Barnstaple, being an outspoken woman, avowed that she had no great fancy for Mr. Compton, whom the Duchess of Islay and others found so charming.

"I admit that he is clever," she would say : "he is a useful sort of man to ask to dinner.

But he is too artificial for my taste and too fond of himself. Chris is a dear, good little girl, without a particle of humbug about her, and I am only too glad that Gracie and she should be allies."

It was with Lady Grace Severne, a pretty, fair-haired girl of about her own age, that Chris went out riding after she had left Dr. Lavergne's house ; and Lady Grace informed her that they were going over to the Nice Carnival on the morrow ; also that they would like to take her with them if her father did not object. This latter formula was only an empty courtesy ; for it was not Mr. Compton's habit to object to his daughter's doing anything or going anywhere. And so it came to pass that, on the following day, Chris, clad in a domino and a wire mask, was seated at an open window overlooking the broad thoroughfare which of late years has become very much what the Corso at Rome used to be on Shrove Tuesday.

She enjoyed it immensely, being blessed with immense faculties for enjoyment, and certainly the scene was pretty and animated enough. The procession of gaily-adorned carriages which passed to and fro in the street beneath : the huge cars, crowded with maskers in fantastic costumes, who showered *confetti* at the windows

and received a galling fire in return : the music, the banners, the brilliant sunshine, the occasional recognition of an acquaintance among the passers-by—all these combined to provide more than a sufficiency of excitement and entertainment for two girls only just out of the schoolroom. As for Lady Barnstaple, who was stout and middle-aged, she sat in the background and groaned over the heat and dust with a few sympathetic dowagers.

"This," exclaimed Chris, "is the sort of thing that I should like to do every day for a week! Then perhaps one might have a chance of getting tired of it. As it is, one has just enough to make one long for more. Gracie, do you know what it is to be bored?"

Lady Grace, upon reflection, rather thought that she did.

"I don't," said Chris, "and I don't believe I ever shall. People say that the London season is a bore; but I think that must be affectation, because why should they go through it if they don't like it?"

"It is one of the things that one has to go through," Lady Grace observed.

"But you *will* enjoy it, Gracie, you know you will! You are just as fond of dancing as

I am, and you like seeing heaps of new faces, just as I do."

"One doesn't see a great many new faces in London, and the dancing men are getting fewer every year, and some of the best balls are given by people whom one's mother won't know. Taking it altogether, it is very tiring and rather poor fun," said Lady Grace, who had elder sisters, and knew what she was talking about.

"Well, I mean to have plenty of fun at all events," said Chris decisively.

"I dare say you will," answered her neighbour, smiling. "You are sure to have plenty of admirers, which is another way of saying the same thing."

"Oh, I don't want *them*," Chris declared, with superb disdain. "Give me a few decent partners, and that is all that I ask. I have made up my mind," she continued, "that I shall not marry. That is, unless somebody very exceptionally nice should turn up. Rich too—yes, I think he had better be rich. And of course he must not object to having my father to live with us."

Lady Grace remarked that many an otherwise amiable husband would draw the line at providing permanent quarters for his father-in-law.

"Then," said Chris, "he would have to do without me. My father would be perfectly wretched if he had to live alone. He thinks he wouldn't; but that is because he doesn't know how many odd jobs I do for him. No servant would ever be able to make him comfortable. Besides which, it cheers him up to have somebody in the house whom he can talk to when he is inclined, and lately he has taken to talking a great deal to me."

Lady Grace was proceeding to point out that if Mr. Compton pined for a patient auditor, there was really nothing to prevent him from marrying a second time; but Chris, who would have deeply resented such a suggestion, did not hear it, her attention having been diverted for the moment by the manœuvres of a tall and graceful youth, wearing a mediæval Venetian costume, who had taken up his station upon the pavement opposite, and who, after lightly tossing a few pellets in at the open window, had thrown a bouquet of exquisite hothouse flowers into her lap.

"It seems," observed Lady Grace, raising her eyebrows and laughing, "that admirers are to be had without going so far as London for them. Who is your picturesque friend?"

"I think it must be Val Richardson—Mr. Richardson," answered Chris.

"Oh!" said Lady Grace, who had a slight acquaintance with this gentleman; and as he raised his plumed cap at that moment, she favoured him with a little bow.

Possibly he may have chosen to interpret that as an invitation. At any rate, he stepped quickly across the street, passed through the doorway above which the girls were seated, and presently entered the room, removing his mask as he did so. He walked straight up to Lady Barnstaple, who stared and then said rather coldly, "Oh—Mr. Robertson, isn't it? How do you do, Mr. Robertson?"

Val was not easily snubbed. He addressed a few commonplaces to the dowagers, then dragged a chair towards the window, and seated himself between the two younger ladies with the easy air of one who is sure of his welcome. And he was, it must be confessed, very successful in amusing them. He knew or appeared to know every one of note in the crowd: his precision of aim was again and again displayed in a way which was rewarded by the laughter and applause which it merited; and if his manner was sometimes a little too familiar, that was an offence which the circumstances of the

occasion rendered less noticeable and more excusable than it would have been at any other time.

But Lady Barnstaple, who had taken very little notice of him, did not seem to be any the more inclined to excuse him on that account. "It strikes me, my dear," she remarked to Chris an hour or so later, while she and her party were waiting at the station for the train which was to take them back to Cannes, "that your friend Mr. Robertson, or Johnson, or Dickson, or whatever his name may be, wants putting into his proper place."

"His name is Richardson—and what is his proper place, Lady Barnstaple?" inquired Chris innocently.

"How in the world should I know?" returned Lady Barnstaple. "Behind a counter, perhaps. Certainly not behind your chair, with his arms stretched over the back of it. And I think," she added, "that your father would agree with me there."

The speech was, of course, injudicious; and Lady Barnstaple, who was by no means a stupid woman, would probably have adopted quite a different method of protecting her own daughter from ineligible suitors; but, after all, she was not Chris Compton's keeper, and what she chiefly desired to express at the moment

was irritation at the impertinence of this Mr. Richardson in forcing his way into her hired premises. Chris, who was not at all likely to be set against any of her friends by hearing them unjustly compared to counter-jumpers, thought a good deal more about Val Richardson on her way home than she would have done if nobody had attacked him ; and the unfortunate conclusion at which she arrived was that he was depreciated by certain persons because he did not happen to be rich. Her father, to be sure, had called him a cad ; but that was what her father was very apt to say about any man to whom he did not take a fancy, and he frequently changed his opinion upon closer acquaintance. "I must try and bring them a little more together," Chris thought.

Lady Barnstaple's carriage was waiting at the station at Cannes. She dropped Chris at the corner of the road which led to Mr. Compton's villa, the girl declaring that she could very well run those few yards and refusing the escort of the footman, though it was now dark. "Nobody ever comes our way after nightfall," she said.

Somebody, however, was standing by the gate of the villa now : somebody whom she presently made out to be old Dr. Lavergne,

and who spread out his arms as if to bar her passage. His arms were trembling a good deal, and so did his voice, as he stammered confusedly: "Stop, *mademoiselle!* stop, my child! I have been waiting for you. I have something to tell you."

"What is the matter?" asked Chris breathlessly. "Has anything happened?"

"Yes—something has happened. Your father—he—he is very ill." And then, as Chris darted forward, he caught her by the arm and held her back, murmuring, "No, no! you must not go home: it would be no use. Come with me, my child. Madame Lavergne will tell you——"

"Do you mean," asked Chris, speaking in a quiet, steady voice, which sounded to her strangely unlike her own, "that he is dead?"

Dr. Lavergne made no reply, and for a few seconds there was absolute silence.

"What was it?" was Chris's next question, put in the same calm, level tone. "Was it an accident?"

"No: there was no accident, and no suffering: you must remember that. Ah, my dear, we must all die; but not many of us can hope to die without long agony: I found him sitting in his chair as though he were asleep. And it

was not unexpected. We were prepared for it ; he himself was prepared for it."

"And yet none of you told me !" cried Chris.

Again the doctor made no answer ; but now Peter, who, instead of giving his mistress the boisterous welcome to which she was accustomed, had remained unseen in the background, crept forward and licked her hand. It was so unlike him to behave in that way, and his sympathy somehow seemed so much more real than that of the poor doctor, who, like all human beings, had begun to point out mitigating circumstances before his bad news was well spoken, that the girl suddenly broke down. She seated herself on a heap of stones by the wayside, caught the little dog up in her arms, and burst out crying like a child.

"Oh, Peter, Peter !" she sobbed, as she kissed his rough head, "what shall we do ? What shall we do ?"

Under cover of the darkness, Dr. Lavergne smiled and drew a long breath. For two mortal hours he had been hovering about the gate, knowing that he had before him one of the most painful tasks which any man can be called upon to perform, and dreading it so intensely, that if he could have escaped by the sacrifice

of every flower in his possession, his garden would have been converted into a wilderness then and there. Now it was over, and well over. "From the moment that she can shed tears," the doctor thought, "there is nothing to fear. She will cry a great deal: they always do when they begin like that; and then she will tire herself out, and then she will sleep. *Allons*, if anybody is ill to-morrow, it will be I rather than she, poor child! At my age it is not good to be so upset."

### CHAPTER III.

ONE fine hot morning, six weeks after the occurrence of the catastrophe recorded in the last chapter, Chris Compton was sitting in Dr. Lavergne's garden, with an open letter lying upon her crape-covered knees, while she gazed abstractedly and sorrowfully at the sunny prospect beneath her. Her father was dead and buried; as was also her happy, irresponsible childhood. Both events seemed to her to have happened a very long time ago, and which of them saddened her the most one may guess, although she did not. Some people assert that no such thing as natural affection exists, save in the one unquestionable instance of the love of a mother for her offspring; but it is not unlikely that these people may be mistaken. Chris had certainly loved her father, whom it must be owned that she had had little ostensible reason for loving. He had been kind

to her in a negative sort of way, giving her plenty of pocket money, allowing her to do as she pleased, and not attempting to make her tastes and habits a reflection of his own, as so many parents insanely do; but he had never been in any true sense of the word her friend. She had, in reality, known nothing at all of the actual man, and consequently it was quite impossible that his removal should leave her as inconsolable as she believed that it had left her. At the end of six weeks she was obliged to acknowledge to herself, with a good deal of unnecessary shame, that life was still sweet, and the sunshine pleasant, and the friendliness of the great human family at large, with which her sympathies were unusually catholic, a source of deep inward gratification.

From the day of her father's death the Laverignes had insisted upon her taking up her quarters with them, and she had been willing enough to agree to what Mr. James Compton, her father's cousin and lawyer, writing from England, called "a suitable temporary arrangement." Mr. James Compton, on behalf of the family, had gratefully accepted the hospitality offered to his kinswoman by the old couple, who had made her feel so

completely at home, that she had often wished, as they declared that they did, that the arrangement might be made permanent, instead of temporary. José, too, had seen and wept with her, making her laugh through her tears by imploring her to accept as a gift the knife which he had refused to sell her a few days before. Lady Barnstaple and Lady Grace had visited her frequently ; and as for the Duchess of Islay and the other great ladies, they had written her very pretty little notes. If they had not been to see her, it was because the sight of sorrow which they could do nothing to alleviate was naturally painful to their tender hearts ; and because, as they said to one another with the customary formula, it was "so much kinder to 'leave the poor girl to herself." All things considered, therefore, it did not look as though the orphan would be without friends in the world ; and so Madame Lavergne ventured to remark to her sceptical husband, who shrugged his shoulders and drew down the corners of his mouth, and returned, "My dear, you must allow them a little time to forget. Be at ease : they will not dispute with you for the possession of your orphan, those ladies."

It was not, however, to be thought of that

a young Englishwoman, with respectable connections in her own country, should be left under the care of a couple of obscure foreigners in the south of France, and the letter from Mr. James Compton which lay on her lap gave Chris to understand that her sojourn under Dr. Lavergne's roof was about to terminate. It was written in the dry, precise style which had characterized several previous communications which she had received from him, and announced that, as he was now able to absent himself from his avocations for a short time, he was upon the point of starting for Cannes in order that he might escort her to England. The arrangements which had been made for her future would, he said, be more easily made known to her by word of mouth than by letter; and the same remark applied to her "financial position," which there had been some delay and difficulty in ascertaining, and which, he confessed, had come upon him, when ascertained, as a surprise.

Two days later he arrived—a thin, dismal, worried-looking man, who wore a tall hat on the back of his head, and had large hands and feet, and blinking blue eyes, and straggling grey whiskers which met under his chin. Chris had never seen him before. She knew

nothing of her relations, of whom, possibly, Mr. Compton may not have been particularly proud. This one, at any rate, did not look as if he would prove much of an acquisition ; nor did he seem to mean what he said, when he greeted her with a mournful "How do you do, Christina ? I am glad to make your acquaintance at last."

He drove up from his hotel to dinner with the Laverignes ; and a very dreary repast this turned out, both for entertainers and entertained. Mr. Compton's command of French was limited : Madame Laverigne was unable to speak a word of any language but her own ; and the doctor, who could chatter broken English with great fluency and rapidity when he chose, was pleased to stand upon his dignity, and declined to make himself ridiculous. It was therefore a great relief to Chris when her cousin, setting down his coffee-cup and declining Dr. Laverigne's proffered cigarette, requested her to take a turn with him in the garden. He proceeded to business without any prefatory observations.

"It has been decided," said he, "that your home henceforth will be with your mother's only sister, Miss Ramsden, whom I believe you do not know personally. Your poor father was not much in the habit—— however, that is of

no consequence. She lives in the neighbourhood of Primrose Hill: the address is 25, Balaclava Terrace, N.W. My own acquaintance with the lady is very slight; but I have seen her, and she has expressed her willingness to receive you upon terms which—which—well, I could not see my way to refusing the terms proposed. I myself have a large family”—here Mr. Compton sighed heavily—“I may say that it would have been simply out of my power to offer you house-room. And, after all, Miss Ramsden is your nearest relation.”

“I have heard of Aunt Rebecca,” observed Chris reflectively. “I remember that my father said she was odd. What is she like?”

“I don’t see how I can be expected to answer such a question,” returned Mr. Compton, with a shade of irritability. “If you come to that, she is not particularly like anything or anybody that I ever saw before. She might be called odd, no doubt. At any rate, the sum which will be paid to her annually on your behalf will entitle you to claim comfortable quarters and—er—an ample diet.”

“I dare say she will give me enough to eat,” said Chris, laughing a little.

“Well, I hope so—I hope so. Should she

fail to carry out her part of the contract, you will do well to address a letter to me, stating specifically what are your grounds for complaint. I must now tell you that your poor father's personalty is smaller, very much smaller, than I should have supposed it to be. He really appears to have spent every penny that he made by his writings."

"Of course he had a perfect right to do what he pleased with his own," said Chris; for she had no idea of allowing her father's actions to be criticised by this pedantic lawyer.

"Certainly; but there are duties as well as rights connected with every position, and it is the duty of every man to provide for his children. I do not mean to say that your father has left you wholly unprovided for; but I fear that you have been accustomed to a rate of expenditure which would be quite out of keeping with your present circumstances. You will henceforth receive a hundred a year from me until you come of age, when my trust will determine; and out of this sum you will have to defray the cost of your dress, washing, and travelling expenses."

"It will be quite enough," Chris declared.

"I am glad to hear you say so; but I must warn you that the sum which I have named

cannot by any possibility be exceeded. Does that dog belong to you ?”

“He does,” answered Chris. “Peter, come and speak to your cousin.”

“Little dog,” said Mr. Compton, making an effort to unbend, “give me your paw.”

“Pooh !” returned Peter, with a scornful snort, and wheeling round, trotted off on tiptoe. Peter had long before this instituted olfactory investigations as to the person of Mr. James Compton, and apparently did not think much of him.

“I suppose,” observed that gentleman, “you will leave your dog here ?”

“Leave him here !” exclaimed Chris. “Certainly not. I shall take him with me.”

Mr. Compton shook his head.

“Miss Ramsden will object, I fear,” said he.

“Then,” returned Chris calmly, “I shall not live with her. Where I go, Peter goes.”

“But really, my dear Christina, you must excuse my telling you that that is not a proper way to speak. How can you help living with Miss Ramsden ?”

“I won’t, that’s all,” Chris answered without loss of temper.

James Compton, as his wife and children had long ago discovered, was a weak sort of person

in private life, though he had the name of being hard and uncompromising as a lawyer. He looked at the girl, who looked fearlessly back at him, and then he sighed and struck his colours, murmuring that he would see what he could do.

"But Miss Ramsden will be sure to ask something extra for his keep," he said. "Ten pounds a year, most likely. I do not for one moment suppose that she would consent to keep a dog for less."

"It will have to come out of my allowance," said Chris.

"Naturally it will : there is no other available fund. I doubt very much, my dear Christina, whether you know how far a hundred a year will go. To many people it would seem quite a large sum : to your mind, I fear, the figure conveys no definite idea at all."

It certainly did not convey much idea, and Chris confessed that it did not ; whereupon her cousin read her a solemn lecture. He was a well-meaning and not unkindly creature in his way ; but he was scarcely a human being, all his faculties from his youth up having been concentrated upon the legal aspect of life. He prosed away for a quarter of an hour, and Chris listened to as much of his discourse as it

was possible to listen to. This, when condensed, amounted to little more than that she would have to live in future with a due regard to economy, that he trusted to her common sense not to make too much of Miss Ramsden's little eccentricities, and that he hoped that she would be ready to start for England in about thirty-six hours' time. It was evident that he found his present trust a great nuisance ; and that he was inclined to grumble (as indeed he had some right to do) at its having been inflicted upon him by a man who had not taken the trouble to speak half-a-dozen times to him in his life, and had left him nothing at all by will.

Chris did not accompany him to the house, whither he returned at length to take leave of his host and hostess. She remained at the end of the garden in the starlight, and meditated upon her future, which did not appear to be a very smiling one, while Peter, who had jumped upon her lap, comforted her to the best of his ability by rubbing his head against her and licking her hands.

"Dear old Peter," she murmured, "you are the best friend I have in the world now."

"I hope not," said a voice close behind her.

"Oh, Mr. Richardson !" she exclaimed, "is that you ? I am so glad ! Only a minute ago

I was wondering whether I should see you to say good-bye. I am going away the day after to-morrow."

The young man groaned. "I thought as much!" said he. "I only heard this evening that your uncle, or guardian, or whatever he is, had arrived, and I came up here at once, because I couldn't bear to let you go without telling you how awfully sorry I was to hear of—of your misfortune, you know. I should have come long before this, only I was afraid of intruding upon you."

"Thank you," answered Chris; "I was sure you would be sorry, and you need not have been afraid of intruding. I should have been very glad to see you."

"I wish I had known! And now you are going away, and I don't know when we shall meet again. You won't quite forget me, will you?"

"Never," Chris declared emphatically. "I shall always remember that it was you who gave me my dear Peter."

Perhaps it was not precisely in that way that Mr. Richardson was desirous of being remembered; for he gave a somewhat dissatisfied grunt. He did not, however, enter any verbal protest, but went on to speak of Chris's fate

and fortune, putting some questions with regard to the latter which, to an experienced person, would have sounded significant. Not being an experienced person, Chris did not think them so; but she was unable to answer them satisfactorily. All that she could tell him was that her aunt was to be remunerated for taking charge of her, and that she was to have an allowance of a hundred a year for her personal expenses until she came of age. What was to happen after that important date she did not know.

"Four years hence—it's a long time. Poor little Chris," murmured Mr. Richardson: "have they made you a ward in Chancery?"

Chris could not say, but had received no information to that effect. "What does a ward in Chancery mean?" she inquired.

"It means, among other things, that supposing your uncle has made you one, I should expose myself to I don't know what pains and penalties if I were to run away with you and marry you to-morrow—which is what I should like to do," replied Mr. Richardson.

Chris was not best pleased with this speech, and she at once expressed her displeasure. "I would rather you did not make jokes of that kind again," she said with dignity.

"But the worst of it is that it isn't a joke at all: it's the soberest of sober earnest," returned the young man. "Chris, dear, I'm an impetuous beggar: I have no right to propose to anybody. But, right or wrong, I can't let you go without telling you that I love you. Is it any use? Will you wait for me, Chris?"

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Chris, snatching away her hand, of which he had suddenly possessed himself. "I like you very much, and you have been very kind to me; but—but—Oh, no: you must not think of that, please!"

"As if I could help thinking of it! Tell me at least this much—do you care for any one else?"

"You know I don't! Didn't you hear me say just now that Peter was my best friend in the world?"

"Well, I am not jealous of Peter. Especially if, as you say, he reminds you of me. Look here, Chris, if you'll give me something to live for, I'll try to reform and give up my naughty habits, and become a respectable member of society. If you won't, I shall go straight to the deuce; and it will be a short enough journey, goodness knows!"

Appeals couched in such terms are often very effective with women, who do not seem to under-

stand that a man who is prepared to go to the deuce if he does not get what he wants, will probably reach that destination in the long run, even if he does. They exaggerate, perhaps, the restraining influence ascribed to them, and do not like to refuse so small a boon as a few words of hope to a despairing fellow-creature. Whether Chris was actuated by pure benevolence, or whether her heart was in some degree touched by the young man's handsome face and the warmth with which he pleaded his cause, certain it is that at the end of another quarter of an hour she found herself after a fashion engaged to Mr. Richardson.

It was only after a fashion. With great generosity, he declared that he could not and would not bind her down to a formal engagement: his prospects were too uncertain, and her own feelings were evidently too undecided for that. All he asked was that she would not engage herself to any other man without letting him know; and he gave her the address of his club in London, receiving in return that of Miss Ramsden's residence, at the sight of which he could not help drawing down the corners of his mouth. He hoped to see her again, he said, in the course of the summer, and meanwhile their quasi-betrothal had better remain a secret

between themselves. Chris did not altogether like this condition, but gave in to it on being assured that it was made for her sake.

"As far as I am concerned," Val said, "I should be only too glad for all the world to know that I am engaged to you; but it wouldn't be fair, because there is no actual engagement. It's a contract which is binding upon me, but not upon you: that's what I want you to understand."

After he had taken his leave—which he did in a very respectful way, and without claiming any of the privileges which lovers are wont to claim—she began to be a little uneasy, and wished that she had had the strength of mind to stick to her refusal; for she was almost sure that she was not, and never would be, in love with Val. Nevertheless, she was grateful to him for loving her, and felt less lonely than she had done earlier in the evening; and she went to sleep with a conviction that the world was not such a dreary and desolate place after all.

All the next day she was busy packing up and bidding farewell to her friends at Cannes; and on the day after that she had to part with the good people whose house had been made a second home to her.

"Write to us often, my child," whispered.

Madame Lavergne, as she embraced her ;  
“and do not forget that your room will always be ready for you here, just as you left it. One never knows what will happen : troubles may always come ; and some day you may be glad to think that there is an old woman in France who loves you like her own daughter.”

Unfortunately, Dr. Lavergne had been grievously affronted by an ill-advised offer on the part of Mr. James Compton to reimburse him for the expense to which he had been put in respect of Chris's board and lodging. He was extremely cold and dignified up to the last moment ; but when the girl threw her arms round his neck and kissed him he suddenly melted and, if the truth must be told, shed a few tears.

“Good-bye, dear *mademoiselle*, good-bye !” he said. “We shall miss you much more than you will miss us—that is only natural. But some day you will come back to us, will you not ?”

But by this time Chris herself was crying bitterly, and could not get out a word. She could only nod and pat the old man on the shoulder. It did not seem likely that she would ever see him again, for he was over seventy, and she would not be her own mistress for four long years to come.

## CHAPTER IV.

CHRIS had always hitherto been accustomed to perform her railway travelling in a more or less luxurious fashion. Her father had been a man who detested discomfort of any kind, and for such a journey as that from Cannes to Paris he would, as a matter of course, have engaged a *coupé salon*. James Compton had no such extravagant notions. He remarked that it was nothing short of scandalous to make up an express train of first-class carriages only, and Chris agreed with him until he added, "If there had been any seconds, it would have been right for us, perhaps, to take advantage of them. Our joint expenses will, of course, have to be defrayed out of the estate, and they ought to be curtailed as much as possible."

After that, Chris thought there might perhaps be something to be said in favour of the French system.

However, she and her companion were made as uncomfortable as they could well be. The annual return of the pilgrims who leave England for the south on the approach of winter had set in: the train was crowded: the compartment in which Chris and her escort were thrust by a peremptory guard had but two vacant places: worst of all, Peter was borne off to the dog-hole, despite the entreaties of his mistress.

"If people will insist upon travelling with dogs, they must submit to these trifling inconveniences," remarked Mr. Compton, as he put on a velvet smoking-cap, and settled himself in a corner of the carriage.

He had taken care to secure a corner for himself. Chris was less fortunate, being jammed between him and a corpulent Englishman, who fell asleep, snored loudly, dropped his head upon her shoulder, and seemed quite angry when she modestly asserted her rights by digging him in the ribs with her elbow. Altogether it was a most miserable journey; and, to add to its annoyances, shortly after leaving Marseilles Peter had the misfortune to bite the guard, who had been bribed to transfer him from the dog-hole into the van. It is absolutely certain that that official must

have done something to deserve what he got, for Peter was not at all the sort of dog to bite any one, without good reason ; but, of course, as justice is understood in the world at present, provocation is no more excuse for a dog who bites a man than it is for a soldier who strikes his superior officer. The guard, boiling over with wrath, came to exhibit his wound, and Chris had to pay up a hundred francs, besides offering the humblest of apologies.

"I expected this!" sighed Mr. Compton, as he handed over the money ; which was an irritating and idiotic thing to say, because he could not possibly have anticipated anything of the sort.

On arriving at Paris in the early morning, Mr. Compton, who had slept profoundly all through the night, and asserted unblushingly that he had not even closed his eyes, declared himself to be fairly broken down with fatigue, which emboldened Chris to suggest that they should make a halt of twenty-four hours. "The extra expense to be laid upon the estate," she added demurely.

"Very well, Christina ; if you insist upon it, let it be so," answered the man-of-law resignedly. "This change of plans will, however, entail telegraphing to Mrs. Compton and Miss

Ramsden, which will mean a further outlay of at least ten shillings, I suppose."

Chris said that probably that last half-sovereign would not break the estate's back; so they drove to an hotel and had a day's rest; and in the evening Mr. Compton treated himself to a stall at the *Variétés*, remarking to his niece that, in the melancholy circumstances, she would naturally not wish to accompany him to any place of entertainment.

She certainly had no such wish. After he had left her, she put on her hat and took Peter for a run to the gardens of the Tuileries, where perhaps she had no business to be walking all by herself at that hour, but where she met with no molestation. Indeed, it seemed to her that the passers-by surveyed her in a friendly, compassionate way, as if they knew that she was about to be carried off to a land in which friendliness is a plant of slower growth. The French people have their faults, and these, it must be confessed, have of late years been made more conspicuous to strangers than their virtues; but Chris, at any rate, had found them generous and warm-hearted, and now that she was upon the point of leaving France, where she had been so happy, she was inclined, like Mary Queen of Scots, to exclaim, "*Adieu, nos beaux jours!*"

She sat down upon one of the iron chairs, while Peter pursued busy investigations in the vicinity and scratched up showers of gravel backwards with his hind legs. "When shall I see Paris again?" she wondered. "When shall I be able to do as I like again? How I wish I knew what was going to become of me!"

It is only in very early youth that we desire to pry into the future, Long before we reach middle age we have learnt enough to know better than that; and if Chris could have been told in what circumstances she was next to see that pleasant city, the information would scarcely have tended to raise her drooping spirits. It was a warm evening, and she sat still until after dark, thinking of old days and old friends, and resolving that, whatever fate might be in store for her, she would face it bravely; but it was a significant circumstance that as soon as she found herself thinking of Val Richardson, she jumped up, whistled to Peter, and walked briskly back towards the hotel.

On the ensuing evening the travellers reached Charing Cross, where they took leave of one another with little regret on either side. Mr. Compton, who had been wofully sick crossing the Channel, and was even more sorry for himself

than usual, offered to see his charge safely to her destination—"although it is a long drive and quite out of my way, and Mrs. Compton particularly dislikes being kept waiting for dinner."

"Pray don't think of it," said Chris; "if you will tell the man where to drive, I shall be all right. Good-bye."

"Good-bye," replied Mr. Compton, "If at any time you should have any observation or—er—complaint to make to me, a letter addressed to 192 Bedford Row will receive attention."

Chris, as she was driven away in the jolting cab made a little grimace. "I dare say he has taken a lot of trouble, and perhaps one ought to be grateful," said she aloud; "but I can't like him, and I don't. Do you, Peter?"

Peter grunted. He had made his opinion of Mr. Compton known at a much earlier stage of the proceedings, and such as his opinions were, he was not in the habit of changing them.

The drive was indeed a long one. Chris soon found herself in a part of London which she had never seen before, and of which the attractions were not such as to make her feel that she had been a loser by not having seen it. Gloomy respectability appeared to be its chief

outward characteristic, and unbroken monotony its doom : it was impossible to believe that in such a district, vast though it was, there could dwell a single human being of ordinarily cheerful temperament. Balaclava Terrace, when at length it was reached, proved to be a trifle more gloomy, though doubtless not less respectable than the neighbouring streets. To Chris it looked almost squalid in its mean ugliness. A row of small red-brick houses, each one the exact duplicate of the other, each with two windows on the ground floor and three on the first floor, each with a shabby little stuccoed portico—she could not help laughing for a moment at the oddity of the notion that she was going to live in a place like that.

The door-bell of No. 25 had to be rung twice before an elderly, plain-featured and somewhat sullen-looking woman, who wore a print gown and an apron, made her appearance. "You needn't tear the 'ole place down," she said resentfully to the cabman; "you ain't in such a desp'rate 'urry but what you can allow a person five seconds to climb up the kitching stairs, I suppose."

"Does Miss Ramsden live here?" Chris inquired.

"All right, miss ; you're expected," answered the woman, "and you'll find Miss Rebecca in the parlour. Left 'and door as you go in. Praps you'd best pay the cabman first, though, and give him somethink extry for carrying the boxes up stairs." Then, in a perfectly audible aside, she ejaculated, "Dogs too! What next, I should like to know!"

Chris, having settled with the cabman, followed the directions given her, entered the house and announced herself.

The room into which she advanced was a shabby and scantily-furnished one ; such furniture as it contained exhibited signs of extreme antiquity ; and so, Chris was amazed to see, did the lady who rose slowly and stiffly to receive her. She had never imagined that her father's sister-in-law could be such a very old woman. As a matter of fact Miss Ramsden had been by many years senior to her late sister ; yet she was not nearly as old as she looked, being at this time scarcely sixty. She was, however, crippled by chronic rheumatism ; and moved with difficulty leaning on a stick. For the rest, she was not a prepossessing-looking old woman. Her rusty black gown seemed to have seen almost as much service as her sofas and chairs ; her iron-grey hair was rough and untidy : her

shaggy eyebrows overhung a pair of restless, suspicious black eyes; and her mouth, which was never still for a moment, had a querulous expression which was quite in accordance with her piping voice.

"I understood that you were to arrive yesterday," she said complainingly. "That lawyer man frightened me to death with his telegram: I am not accustomed to receiving telegrams."

Chris apologised, and explained that both she and her escort had been so tired by their journey from Cannes, that they had thought it as well to take a day's rest in Paris.

"You would have had plenty of time to rest here in a comfortable house, which would have been better than squandering your money in a foreign hotel, I should have thought; but your father's daughter was sure to be extravagant, and no doubt you will have your own way in everything, like your poor mother, and it isn't for me to speak. I said to that lawyer, 'I am willing to give her house-room and every comfort; but more than that you must not ask of me.' I can't change people's natures or make them go right if they are determined to go wrong. I am only a weak old woman, and nobody ever thinks of obeying me. Get off that chair this instant, you nasty, dirty little beast!"

This last apostrophe, which was uttered in a much shriller and more authoritative key, was addressed to Peter, who had stationed himself in an armchair and was surveying the speaker dubiously, with his ears cocked and his head on one side.

"Come down, Peter!" said Chris. She added in conciliatory accents, "He is a very good dog: I don't think you will find him in your way, Aunt Rebecca."

"I have consented to let you keep him," returned Miss Ramsden, with a sigh. "I have brought him upon myself, and I must put up with him. But he shall not destroy the furniture: that much I do think I have a right to require."

It did not take Chris many days to discover that her aunt was one of those persons who must needs have a grievance, and to whom it is wisest to concede that privilege without argument. Perhaps the chief reason why Chris made friends wherever she went was that she was so quick at reading character and so ready to allow for the failings and peculiarities of her neighbours. Many of us plume ourselves not a little upon an acquired philosophy which came by nature to this child. There is, however, one vice which young people can very rarely bring

themselves to pardon ; and this, as it happened, was Miss Ramsden's ruling passion. Chris suspected it when she was invited to partake of a cup of weak tea and a slice of bread and butter, instead of dinner : she was sure of it on the morrow, when it proved that Martha, the sullen-looking woman who had admitted her, was the only servant kept in the establishment ; that dinner, which took place in the middle of the day, was represented by a couple of mutton chops and a wedge of uneatable cheese ; and that half an inch of candle was considered to be amply enough to light her to bed. Nevertheless, she did not think of penning that remonstrance which her father's executor had almost invited. She cared a great deal more for liberty than she did for food ; and she soon perceived that her aunt was not likely to grudge the one so long as she was not pestered for a sufficient supply of the other. It is impossible to feel much affection or any respect for the niggardly ; but it is possible to tolerate them, if they be not tyrants into the bargain, and Chris did her best to conciliate the unamiable old woman with whom she was constrained to dwell.

The result was a complete failure—the first failure of the kind that Chris had ever en-

countered. Miss Ramsden cared for nothing and nobody in the whole world, except money, and why she should have cared for that, considering how little it did for her, is one of the inexplicable mysteries of human nature. But although she had lost her power of love, she had not lost that of hate, and from the outset she and Peter became bitter enemies. In justice to her, it must be acknowledged that Peter was not altogether blameless in the matter of this prolonged and deadly feud. He knew, of course, that she disliked him, and knowing that, obeyed his natural instinct by doing all that he could to annoy her. He jumped upon the chairs, getting down with alacrity and with an air of innocent surprise when commanded to do so : he rubbed himself against her legs with a false air of friendship as soon as he discovered that she particularly disliked this habit : he lay in ambush for her when she was coming down stairs, and bounced out at her, barking loudly, in the hope of making her miss her footing. Also he would pretend to be overcome by fits of uncontrollable spirits, and would tear round and round the drawing-room, his legs flying in all directions, and his claws scratching the worn-out carpet, until she shrieked to her niece to stop him.

"That beast," she gasped, "will end by going mad and biting us all—I know he will!"

At dinner-time she took her revenge. Peter was accustomed to have a little meat with his dinner, as all dogs of his breed ought to have, and against this practice Miss Ramsden would protest vehemently. It was bad for "the beast": it was a sinful waste of food, which many a poor man would be thankful to have: it was not what she had bargained for when she had agreed to allow a dog into her house; and so forth. For the first two or three days Chris calmly disregarded these attacks: but then she began to find them insupportable. Only a very thick-skinned person can bear to listen to the same speeches at the same hour on every day of the week *ad infinitum*, and it was evident that Peter would have to be fed at some time when Miss Ramsden's soul would not be vexed by seeing him eat.

Thus it was that Chris arrived at an amicable understanding with Martha, to whom Peter had already become suspiciously civil. Martha, when taxed with her offence, pleaded 'guilty to the extent of "a few odd bits and scraps." She said, in an aggressive sort of way, that she wasn't going to see man nor beast starved on them premises,

and though "not partial" to dogs as a general thing, confessed to a sneaking fondness for this one. With the mistaken kindness of her class, she would doubtless have fed poor Peter to death had she possessed the means of doing so ; but, fortunately for him, she did not. To keep herself alive upon the daily dole of rations served out to her was about as much as she could contrive ; yet she made no complaint, and was greatly displeased with Chris for suggesting that she was entitled to complain.

"Woman and girl, I've lived with Miss Rebecca these thirty years," said she, "and if she has her faults 't isn't for me to lay my finger upon 'em. Maybe she's a bit near : who says she ain't ? There's been spendthrifts as well as misers in the family, I understand."

However, she insisted upon surreptitiously supplying nourishment to the girl as well as to the dog ; and it must be confessed the former often felt the need of it as much as the latter. "Don't you let on to Miss Rebecca, my dear," Martha would say, when she carried up a tray of refreshments to Chris's bedroom. "I know how to manage her, and if the bills comes to four or five shillings a week extry, why four or five extry shillings she will have to pay, and that's all about it."

To have conciliated Martha was something ; but it was hardly enough to make life endurable to one who had hitherto lived in a world peopled by friends, and Chris could not but feel sore when week after week passed by and these friends gave no sign of remembering her. The newspapers told her that the Duchess of Islay, and Lady Barnstaple, and a host of others were in London, and that Lady Grace Severne had been presented ; but none of them found their way to Primrose Hill, and Chris had nothing to do and nothing to look forward to except to take Peter for a walk in the Regent's Park every afternoon, and play *bésique* with her aunt every evening. Moreover, her aunt grumbled at her unceasingly.

"I have surrounded you with luxuries," the old woman would say (she pronounced the word "lugsuries," which somehow gave it a richer sound) : "I do everything that I can think of to make you happy ; and yet you look miserable and seem to consider yourself ill-used. That was just your poor mother's way. She didn't know when she was well off. She insisted upon marrying a man who spent her whole fortune in a year ; and I fully expect that you will follow in her footsteps."

It really seemed quite possible. If Val

Richardson had made his appearance at that time, Chris would probably have consented to marry him ; and if he could have obtained control over her fortune, he would assuredly have dissipated it within the period named. But the longest lane has a turning. One day, about the middle of the month of July, the denizens of Balaclava Terrace were startled by the apparition of a very smart victoria which dashed up to the door of No. 25, and out of it stepped a stout, homely-looking lady, who asked for Miss Compton.

“ My dear,” Lady Barnstaple said, when she had embraced her young friend, and had been introduced to Aunt Rebecca, who fixed a stony, covetous stare upon her diamond earrings, “ you have been calling us all sorts of bad names, I am sure. But you see, I knew you could not be going out anywhere while you were in such deep mourning, and next season, when you discover what it is to have an engagement for every hour of every day, you will find it more easy to pardon us. But Heaven be praised ! the season is almost over now, and next week I am going to take Gracie down to my little cottage in Devonshire to recruit. Will you come with us, if your aunt can be induced to spare you for a week or two ? ”

Miss Ramsden inclined her head solemnly and sorrowfully. "I should be unwilling," said she, "to prevent my niece from amusing herself in any way. I have done my best ; but I cannot flatter myself that she has found my society amusing."

Lady Barnstaple smiled and looked as if that announcement did not greatly surprise her. "A little change is always good for young people," she remarked. "As far as amusement goes, I'm afraid we haven't much of that to offer you, Chris ; but it will be a great pleasure to Gracie to have you with her again, if you will come. I ought to tell you that she has been bothering me to call upon you for weeks past. To-day she has gone to Hurlingham with one of her sisters. If you haven't seen us long ago, you must blame me and try to forgive me."

Chris, who at first had been a little inclined to hang back from the tardy advances made to her, was mollified when Lady Barnstaple took her hand and squeezed it and looked at her with a broad, good-humoured smile.

"I did think Gracie had forgotten me," she confessed ; "but I'm glad she hasn't, and I should like very much to go to Devonshire with you, Lady Barnstaple."

## CHAPTER V.

LORD BARNSTAPLE, who owned many acres in North Devon, was not particularly fond of visiting the county from which he took his title. He was a very rich man, owning estates in other parts of England upon which he was more or less bound to reside ; moreover he had a moor and a deer-forest in Scotland which engaged his attention from the twelfth of August until late in the autumn. Lady Barnstaple however was wont, at the close of the London season, to betake herself for weeks, or even months, to Brentstow Cottage, which was hardly a cottage in the ordinary acceptation of the term. It may have started in life with some claim to that denomination ; but it had been so frequently and so extensively added to that it could accommodate a considerable number of guests, despite its unpretending style of architecture and the smallness of its reception rooms.

Guests came to Lady Barnstaple, as guests do in these days, for two or three nights : there were arrivals and departures every morning and evening ; but Chris was begged to stay on as long as she liked, and the invitation was so cordially given that she could not doubt its sincerity. The hospitality to which she was made welcome had been extended to her beloved Peter ; so that she had no reason for wishing to return to Balaclava Terrace, whence Miss Ramsden never stirred from year's end to year's end. And life at Brenstow was rendered very pleasant to her. Her time was her own to employ as she chose : she was neither neglected nor entertained, a mode of treatment which sounds simple and is difficult in practice, as many hostesses and many guests are aware : the great people who alighted for a while on their way to or from one of the neighbouring great houses, and whom she scarcely saw except at dinner-time, were kind and civil to her, and she got on very well with them all, though she had begun to understand that their class was not the same as hers. Her father's book-plates exhibited a coat of arms with numerous quarterings, and she had always imagined that the difference between her father and a duke was only one of degree ; but now she perceived that

fashionable people, whether dukes or not, live in a world of their own, from which unfashionable people are perforce excluded, and that there was no likelihood of her ever being admitted into that earthly paradise.

Even Lady Grace, unassuming as she was, had been a little changed by her season in London. The two girls resumed their friendship, but could not take it up exactly where they had dropped it. The one, being rather pretty, a good deal admired, and certain to marry well before long, accepted without elation a destiny which she had foreseen, and unconsciously assimilated the tastes and habits which belong to it ; the other knew not what might be before her, only she knew that, such as her dreams had been, they could never now be fulfilled. It is always sad that young people should not have what they would like to have. We, whose youth is past, have ceased to be exacting : we know what is attainable and what is not : it does not occur to us to cry for the moon : we have watched the careers of our contemporaries and are thankful enough for negative blessings. Yet some of us, who have not forgotten the days when we were less easily satisfied, can feel for boys and girls who before they have outgrown the age of illusions are

made to understand that the world was not created for them.

However Chris, as has been said before, was something of a philosopher. The future being dim and somewhat gloomy, she wisely left it to take care of itself; and she was able to enjoy the present, notwithstanding that new-born consciousness of being "an outsider" and her inability to take part in conversations which dealt with men and matters whereof she was necessarily ignorant. Sometimes she went out riding with Lady Grace and one or other of the young men who appeared and disappeared like meteors; but more often she and Peter went out for a ramble by themselves after luncheon and appreciated the pleasures of a country life after their respective fashions.

Peter, poor fellow, had poaching instincts which he could not always control; but he tried harder than most of us do to curb his natural passions, and it was only when his mistress lost sight of him that temptation got the upper hand of his moral sense. For this reason, and in consequence of certain rather uncalled for complaints on the part of the keeper, Chris took care never to lose sight of him, and one afternoon she made him sit down beside her, as usual, on the outskirts of a wood whence a view

could be obtained of the long Atlantic rollers breaking against a barrier of grey cliffs and gigantic boulders. Having established herself comfortably with her back against the trunk of a tree, she drew a long letter from Madame Lavergne out of her pocket and began leisurely reading it through for the second time. She was laughing softly as she perused a passage in which her correspondent related how the Doctor had got himself into sad trouble by writing to the local papers to denounce the drainage of a certain quarter of the town as calculated to produce pestilence, when she was interrupted by a volley of furious barks from Peter, who until then had been sitting disconsolately on his haunches, shivering all over and whimpering under his breath in token of his knowledge that there were rabbits in the neighbourhood and of his desire to make closer acquaintance with them.

The cause of his present excitement was evident: somebody close at hand was thrashing a dog. Chris could hear each blow as it fell, and the yells which followed might have been heard half a mile away. Up she jumped—for, by her way of thinking, the beating of a dog was an act which called for instant explanation—and, hurrying towards the direction from

which the clamour proceeded, she presently descried in an adjoining field a tall, broad-shouldered young man who had got a Gordon setter by the collar and was administering castigation with no light hand.

"Leave that dog alone!" shouted Chris indignantly; and as her behest was unheard or unheeded, she started running towards the aggressor. "You there!" she called out again when she was within a few yards of him; "let that dog go at once!"

The young man raised an astonished face. It was a red face, partially concealed by a reddish beard, the face of a clown, though his appearance was that of a gentleman. He was dressed in a Norfolk jacket and knickerbockers and a deer-stalker cap, which last he lifted with the hand which held his stick when he saw that he was being addressed by a lady.

"Excuse me," said he, half politely, half angrily, "but perhaps you don't know that this dog belongs to me."

"I don't care who he belongs to," returned Chris; "you sha'n't ill-treat him like that."

Perhaps the stranger was tickled by the brave words and diminutive stature of his assailant; perhaps, and more probably, he was attracted by her pretty face. At any rate he burst into

a loud laugh, released his victim with a parting kick, and strode towards the fence over which Chris was leaning, while Peter trotted up to the setter to ask what it was all about, and got snarled at for his pains.

"You see," said Chris, pointing to the two dogs, "you are ruining the poor beast's temper. That is what always comes of thrashing them."

"May I ask," the young man inquired deferentially, yet with a slight covert suggestion of insolence, "whether you have had a large experience in training sporting-dogs?"

Chris admitted that she had no such special knowledge. "But," said she, "I do know something about dogs in general, and I know that they are never thrashed in such a cruel way except by people who are too stupid or too brutal to be trusted with dogs at all."

"Well," returned the gentleman with the red beard, who did not look good-tempered, yet kept his temper in circumstances which most men would have found trying, "I may be stupid. All the same, I have broken in a good many dogs, first and last, and I have always had to lick them. How do you account for the fact that all my dogs are fond of me?"

"I don't account for it," answered Chris, not a whit appeased. "For one thing, I don't know that it is a fact; and if it were, it would only show how superior your dogs are to you. Why can't you have a little patience with them? If they disobey you, it is only because they don't understand what you want."

The stranger laughed again and seated himself sideways on the fence. "We won't argue the point," he said. "I think you are mistaken; but I'll give your system a trial with this brute, if you like. Will that satisfy you?"

It was difficult to express dissatisfaction with a surrender so complete. Chris relaxed something of the severity of her demeanour. "Only I wish," she remarked, "that I could make you feel a little ashamed of yourself. Don't you see that you ought to be merciful to animals who aren't big enough or strong enough to fight you?"

"They wouldn't know that unless they were taught it, and they know how to show fight, I can assure you. I've been bitten often enough."

"I am sincerely glad to hear it," Chris declared.

"Yes; but no dog has ever bitten me more than once. The long and the short of it is

that they have to find out who is master. That's a nice little terrier of yours."

This last remark was pretty sure to be favourably received. Peter was called up and appeared to recognise a brother sportsman in the stalwart gentleman who made familiar little noises at him and sent him after an imaginary cat. Then Chris made friends with the setter, who crouched at her feet, looking up at her with piteous, beseeching eyes.

"Well," said his master, laughing, "he has had his last licking anyhow. I don't suppose he'll ever be any use. Perhaps you would like to have him. If so——"

"Thank you," replied Chris gravely; "but you must not give him away, or you will have no opportunity of trying the experiment of kindness upon your animals. Besides, one dog is quite enough to keep in London."

"Do you live in London?"

"Yes. I am staying with Lady Barnstaple at present."

"Oh, old Lady Barnstaple! Is she here now? Upon my word, I ought to call on old Lady Barnstaple, and I will some day soon. My name is Ellacombe: I live at a place called Hatherford, close by this. What time would one be likely to find you at home?"

"To find Lady Barnstaple at home, do you mean? As a general thing, between five and six o'clock, I should think."

"All right: I'll make a note of it. And look here, Miss—might I venture to ask your name?"

"Compton."

"Miss Compton, I hope you won't set me down as a brute because you happened to see me licking a dog. You won't hear much good of me from the Severnes, I dare say: most of the people about here hate me like poison, and I'm sure they're very welcome. But I ain't so bad as they make me out—I ain't really."

Chris looked at him and thought that perhaps he was not altogether a brute, although there was evidently a strong spice of the brute in him. His forehead was low, his eyes were small, and his jaw was heavy; yet he seemed to be a gentleman, and he had a straightforwardness of manner which was not unpleasing. As, however, the result of her observation was scarcely flattering enough to be imparted to him, she contented herself with making him a bow and wishing him good evening.

On her way back to the house she met Lady Grace, who said she had been trying to arrange the dinner-table and had made a hopeless mess

of it. "Would you mind coming in and helping me, Chris? As it is at present, it looks more like a slice of the kitchen-garden than anything else."

"Will there be many people to-night?" Chris asked.

"Oh, yes: a fresh batch has just arrived. Nobody particularly interesting, except my youngest brother Gerald, who has come here to pay his respects before going to Scotland. Gerald is in the diplomatic service: he is third secretary at Paris, and he has just got a few weeks' leave. He is much the nicest of my brothers, and I want to induce him to stay a short time, if I can, so perhaps I had better begin by putting him beside you at dinner."

Whether this arrangement, which was duly carried out, produced the desired effect upon Mr. Severne or not, it was an agreeable one to Chris, who took a great liking to her neighbour. Gerald Severne was a well-dressed, well-mannered, and by no means ill-looking young fellow of five or six and twenty. He had the family fair hair, the family blue eyes, and a fairly good reproduction of the celebrated family profile. If he was not quite as handsome as his elder brothers, he had a pleasanter expression of countenance than they, and

according to his mother he had the advantage over them in respect of qualities which are not merely skin-deep.

"Gerald," Lady Barnstaple confided to Chris before dinner, "is our good boy. He has never run into debt or made love to other people's wives or misbehaved himself in any way, and although it is dangerous to crow, I really don't believe that he ever will."

The good boy of the family is not always a fascinating person: sometimes he is very decidedly the reverse; and to be so described is a distinction little coveted by the young. But perhaps Gerald Severne was only good by comparison. He was at all events not so offensively good as to displease his companion, who listened to him with apparent interest, and in whom he, for his part, soon began to feel strongly interested. Discovering, as she presently did, that, like herself, he was a lover of dogs, she related to him how, that very afternoon, she had been instrumental in rescuing a beautiful Gordon setter from a method of treatment which could only result in ruining him; whereupon he disappointed her a little by answering: "Oh, I know the brute; and a hopelessly ill-conditioned brute he is."

"I don't think so," said Chris; "it seemed

to me that he had only been misunderstood. If his master will keep his promise and have patience with him, he will find out what he is wanted to do and do it, just like other setters."

"I was speaking of the two-legged brute," answered Gerald, with a smile. "I have no doubt you are right about the other."

"Well," said Chris, "I shouldn't wonder if the two-legged brute had been misunderstood also. I thought him rather nice in some ways."

"Did you? I doubt whether you would go on thinking so if you got to know him better. I haven't seen much of him since he grew up, because I'm hardly ever in these parts nowadays; but I hear that he has developed into pretty much what he promised to develop into as a boy. He always was a boor, and now they say he is a drunken boor, which doesn't sound like an improvement. However, you are not likely to come across him again; for he doesn't care to associate with people of his own class, and nobody ever meets him, except perhaps once or twice during the shooting-season."

"He says he is coming to call here some day soon," Chris remarked.

Mr. Severne whistled. "He does, does he? I'm afraid we mustn't flatter ourselves that that amiable intention is due to any charms of ours.

Well, Miss Compton, if you succeed in taming him, you will succeed where everybody else has failed up to now."

"What monster has Chris been taking in hand?" inquired Lady Barnstaple, whom a pause in the general conversation had enabled to overhear her son's last words. And when an explanation had been furnished to her she laughed and did not look displeased. "Mr. Ellacombe is a bear," said she; "but I dare say he can be made to dance if the right person pipes to him."

Gerald shrugged his shoulders and remarked, "I can't imagine that it would be worth any one's while to pipe to Ellacombe, or to see him dance."

But his mother rejoined: "My dear boy, he has a very nice property. A great many people, I believe, have thought it worth while to try and put him through his paces; only, as you were saying just now, they haven't succeeded, and that has naturally embittered them against him. Most likely he isn't half as black as he is painted. I hope you told him that I should be very glad to see him, Chris?"

"I told him that you were generally at home at tea-time," answered Chris.

"Oh, he wanted to find me at home, then?"

After that, the least we can do is to ask him to dinner," said Lady Barnstaple laughing.

Lady Barnstaple was a kind-hearted woman, not more worldly than her neighbours, and, like her neighbours, given to valuing all bachelors by the standard of their possessions. Mr. Ellacombe, who was but a country squire, albeit a wealthy one, would hardly have suited her as a husband for one of her own daughters ; but she thought—and of course she was in one sense right—that he would be a great catch for this poor little friendless girl. What matrimonial chances can there be for a girl who lives with an old maiden aunt in the neighbourhood of Primrose Hill ? Lady Barnstaple was really fond of Chris : she had after a fashion undertaken to befriend her, and she quite conscientiously thought that she would be doing remarkably well for the orphan by handing her over to a man who was a notorious drunkard and about whose moral character some unpleasant stories had been circulated in the county. It seems a little unfair to add—and yet it is probably the truth—that her ladyship would not have been very sorry if Miss Compton's early marriage should render it unnecessary to present her at Court and introduce her to London society. Which of us

knows all his own motives or could be got to believe in them, if pointed out to him? So Lady Barnstaple said to herself that a great many men begin by taking more wine than is good for them and get out of that and other bad habits when they are provided with a good wife. As for the unpleasant stories, they might be true, or untrue, or partially true. It is best not to inquire too closely into these things, thought Lady Barnstaple, who had not been brought up in a particularly straitlaced school.

Thus it is that elderly ladies are wont complacently to settle the destinies of their juniors, forgetting that they too were once young, and that at that time they were convinced of nothing more profoundly than of their right to settle their own destinies for themselves. While this elderly and shortsighted lady was seated in the drawing-room, keeping up perfunctory conversation with certain of her friends and thinking with self-approval how kind she was going to be to poor little Chris Compton, her youngest son, her Benjamin, whom she proposed to marry in due season to somebody good enough for him—to somebody, that is, who should combine the advantages of rank, beauty, and fortune—was strolling up and down the terrace outside with the impoverished orphan afore-

said, and was becoming more and more certain every minute that he had at last met his true affinity. He was not inexperienced : he had met with a host of women at home and abroad who had been accounted lovely and fascinating ; and if he had not fallen a victim to the charms of any of them it was because he had always had his own feminine ideal. And here, at this improbable time and place, had appeared the realisation of it ! It was really a bad look out for him as well as for Lady Barnstaple ; for the allowance made him by his father was only a modest one, and he had never been in the habit of denying himself any luxuries.

As for Chris, Mr. Severne was no more to her than an exceedingly pleasant young fellow whose tastes and ways of thinking coincided with her own. She had no idea that she was doing anything at all out of the way by walking and sitting with him on the terrace there, looking down upon the moonlit sea and the dark outlines of the woods and cliffs.

But perhaps a different opinion was entertained by Lady Grace, who came out of the house at last and who said, with a perceptible ring of anxiety in her voice, " My dear Gerald, do you know that it is eleven o'clock ? What have you been doing all this time ? "

"Miss Compton and I," replied Gerald "have been having a most delightful conversation. We have been comparing notes as to what we should do if we had ten thousand a year apiece, and the odd thing is that we are quite agreed at all points. We should live somewhere down here in Devonshire; we should do a little hunting in the Midlands during the winter: we should buy up all the lost dogs at Battersea, and"—

"What nonsense!" interrupted Lady Grace a trifle impatiently. "I don't believe either of you would do anything of the sort, and I know one of you who is very unlikely to have ten thousand a year until he is a gouty old ambassador. Meanwhile, how long are you going to stay with us, Gerald? Can you spare us three days?"

"I feel very much inclined to spare you three weeks," was the unexpected reply, to which Lady Grace did not respond with the enthusiastic gratitude which she would have expressed some hours earlier.

## CHAPTER VI.

SOME people find out how to ride instinctively, just as some people know how to play the piano and others know how to draw or paint. In all of these arts there is, of course, a great deal which can only be acquired by instruction ; but in all there is something, too, which can never be taught, and without which proficiency in any one of them is absolutely unattainable. Chris had had very little equestrian tuition ; but she had a firm seat, plenty of nerve and a light hand ; all of which gifts were duly recognised and admired by Gerald Severne the first day that he went out riding with her.

“ I really know nothing about it,” she said, in answer to some complimentary remarks of his ; “ but it isn’t very difficult to stick on a horse’s back, and I can generally get on with them, because I understand how they feel.”

"Ah," laughed Gerald, "that's the secret. One could get on with most animals, even with human beings, if one only understood how they felt. Unfortunately the lower animals can't tell us, and the humans won't."

"I don't see why they shouldn't," Chris declared. "The humans, I mean."

"Nor do I; and it would simplify existence immensely if they would. But unless everybody agreed to play the game, it would hardly do for one of us to begin, would it? If I were to tell you how I am feeling at this moment, for instance, you probably wouldn't believe me, and I am not sure that you would be pleased with me."

I don't mind telling you how I am feeling," returned Chris: "I am feeling perfectly happy."

That sounded like a satisfactory announcement; but she spoilt the effect of it a little by explaining, "My idea of perfect happiness is to be riding a spirited horse over a grass country on a breezy day." Besides, it was rather disappointing that she should manifest no curiosity as to the condition of mind which he had professed himself reluctant to reveal.

"Company, I suppose," he remarked, after a pause, "is a secondary consideration?"

"Quite secondary," she replied laughing. "However, I don't complain of yours."

It must not be supposed that it was in the company of Mr. Severne alone that Chris was exploring the moorlands which dominate Brentstow. Lady Barnstaple, unsuspecting though she was, would never have countenanced such a proceeding as that; and a couple of hundred yards or so in the rear of this couple Lady Grace was entertaining an elderly nobleman, who said he enjoyed a gallop as much as anybody, but didn't see the fun of making yourself and your horse hot by pounding along at racing speed over treacherous ground, like a cockney on Hampstead Heath. Thus our heroine and her cavalier were efficiently chaperoned and at the same time left entirely to their own devices, which is a happy state of things permitted by the conventionalities of this country, and largely taken advantage of by those to whom it applies.

These young people, who, after all, were little more than a boy and a girl, had a half-mile race, which was won triumphantly by Chris, and which Gerald rode after a fashion which his backers, if he had had any, would perhaps have felt justified in inviting him to explain. Then they drew rein and returned at a foot's

pace towards their companions, who said it was time to go home, but who did not interrupt their *tête-à-tête* for long. Lady Grace, it is true, made a feeble attempt to join her brother, and shift a burden which properly belonged to her on to the shoulders of her friend; but to such a change of partners it is essential that there should be at least two consenting parties, and Gerald was so quietly obstinate in his resistance, that there was nothing for it but to let him do as he wished.

"I'm afraid Gracie has been having rather a slow afternoon," he remarked to Chris, when they were once more alone; "but it can't be helped. Somebody must talk to that old duffer, and I don't see why it should be you or I."

"I doubt whether it would interest him to be talked to by me," said Chris; "but I am sure he would be glad to hear all about French politics from you. I heard him saying at dinner last night that our relations with France were in a far more dangerous condition than is generally imagined."

"If that is the case, I mustn't venture to approach him. I should be sure to let out some state secret, and then I should get into a terrible row. Thank you very much for warning me."

So this cautious young diplomatist remained out of temptation's way, and prolonged for another quarter of an hour an interview in which neither caution nor diplomacy was conspicuously displayed. Chris and he, having cantered on ahead, had reached the gates of Brentstow when they descried a horseman advancing towards them across the park. He was apparently upon bad terms with his mount, a gigantic chestnut, who was plunging, rearing and bucking, and receiving in return a castigation as heavy as a heavy arm and whip could make it.

"Our friend, or rather your friend, Ellacombe," remarked Gerald. "I suppose he has been up to call, and is punishing his horse because nobody was at home."

Whatever may have been Mr. Ellacombe's motive for punishing his horse, he ceased doing so the moment that he caught sight of Chris, and the chestnut at once ceased plunging. "Sorry to have missed you, Miss Compton," he called out as soon as he was within speaking distance. "I thought you said you were always in at five o'clock."

"I said you would generally find Lady Barnstaple at home at that hour," answered Chris.

"Oh!" grunted Mr. Ellacombe, who looked sullen and dissatisfied. "Well, she isn't at home to-day, anyhow." And then, after a prolonged stare, "Isn't that Gerald Severne?"

Gerald urbanely acknowledged his identity, adding, "It's a good many years since we met last, and I don't wonder at your not being sure of me. I knew you like a shot; but then you are an unchangeable sort of person—particularly in your style of riding. Your elbow doesn't seem to have lost any of its power."

Ellacombe threw him an angry glance, which he would probably have followed up by an angry word or two if at this moment Lady Grace had not joined the group, attended by her mature cavalier. Lady Grace, no doubt, took in the situation at a glance, and had her reasons for being polite to a man whom she particularly disliked; for she greeted Mr. Ellacombe quite cordially, and begged him to turn back and have a cup of tea with them, which invitation he at once accepted.

"Tea isn't very much in your line, is it, Ellacombe?" asked Gerald, with an innocent air.

"As much as it is in yours, I dare say," returned the other, scowling at his interrogator ominously.

Evidently the two men were ready to quarrel

upon the smallest provocation. They went on sparring together all the way back to the house, and continued doing so after the whole party had dismounted and had grouped itself round the tea-table on the lawn, while the cause of their strife remained neutral and indifferent, being less interested in either of them than in making Peter climb up on to her shoulder and take a biscuit off her hat, an accomplishment which he had lately acquired, and of which he was pardonably proud.

After a time Lady Barnstaple returned from her drive, and getting out of the carriage came forward to welcome her neighbour, which she did with unusual warmth. She would perhaps have pleased him a little better if she had not addressed him as "Mr. Widdicombe"; but one can't be expected to remember the exact name of a man to whom one has not spoken for three or four years, and but for that trifling slip, her ladyship's graciousness would have left nothing to be desired.

Ellacombe rode away at length, with a strong and perfectly correct impression that the Brentstow people wished to cultivate him; and as soon as he had departed Gerald exclaimed rather irritably, "My dear mother, what possessed you to be so civil to that oaf!"

But in truth he knew as well as anybody what had possessed her, and the knowledge was far from being agreeable to him. . How is it, he wondered, that good and kind-hearted women can complacently form projects from which even the coarsest of men would shrink back ashamed? The problem is one which has puzzled many observers besides Gerald Severne, and perhaps it has never been quite satisfactorily solved.

For the rest, it did not seem very probable that Miss Compton would lend herself to Lady Barnstaple's atrocious designs, and in a few hours Gerald was able to forget the existence of the obnoxious Ellacombe. To be in love is not, as everybody knows, unmixed bliss; yet it compares not unfavourably with other forms of human happiness, at all events during those golden days which mark the earlier stages of the passion. When the questions of marriage, of settlements and of communicating to one's friends the fact that one is no longer a free agent obtrude themselves, the alloy becomes as apparent as the true metal; but who thinks of troubling his head with such prosaic possibilities while he has as yet hardly ventured to dream that his love may some time be returned?

So Gerald Severne had his golden days like

other people, and made the most of them. He rode with Chris : he sailed with her in the little half-decked cutter which his mother owned, but never used : he played lawn-tennis with her against all comers, and was uniformly victorious. Afterwards he thought that he had never enjoyed life one hundredth part as much as he did during these days, although at the time they had their drawbacks. Chris was friendly with him ; but he could not flatter himself that she was anything more, and he made acquaintance with the pangs of jealousy ; for there were young men as well as old ones among Lady Barnstaple's guests, and the young men seemed to appreciate Miss Compton's charms.

One afternoon a prawning-party, consisting of Chris, Gerald, Lady Grace, and a certain Lord Forfar, who was youthful, wealthy, and the heir-apparent to a marquise, was organised with the approval of Lady Barnstaple, who thought that her daughter could not go prawning in better company, and was curiously blind to the dangers incurred by her son. Prawning is not bad fun for those who have taken the precaution to put on wading-boots, but it is a form of sport in which ladies can hardly participate with comfort ; and perhaps that was why Lord Forfar and Mr. Severne did not secure a

very heavy bag. For form's sake they paddled about a while among the pools and rocks ; but before very long they agreed that it was too hot for that sort of thing, and returned to the ladies, whom they had left under the shadow of the cliffs. Then, as was to be expected, they split into pairs, and Chris, accompanied by Mr. Severne, wandered along the shore to a promontory whence the coast for miles to the northward and southward was visible, and Lundy Island could be descried upon the misty horizon.

There they seated themselves upon a broad, flat rock, while Peter barked furiously at the breakers ; and there they would have contentedly remained for any length of time if they had not been startled by the sudden skimming past them of a stone, which had evidently been thrown from the cliff above.

"Confound that fellow!" exclaimed Gerald, jumping up ; "he might have cut your head open. Hi! there,—stop shying stones, will you, unless you would like me to come up and teach you a lesson in manners!"

"Hi, yourself!" responded a powerful voice from above. "Do you know you're trespassing?"

"I do believe it's that brute Ellacombe

again," muttered Gerald. "Hang him! he's always turning up." Then he shouted: "Don't you be too sure of that. I may be wrong; but my impression is that this rock is the property of the Crown."

Mr. Ellacombe—for he it undoubtedly was, and his magnificent proportions were clearly defined against the sky—responded by an unintelligible bellow: immediately after which he was seen descending the face of the cliff precipitately by a zigzag path, dislodging small avalanches of pebbles on his way. As soon as he was within speaking distance of Chris he began a breathless apology.

"I'm awfully sorry, Miss Compton—I can't tell you how sorry I am! The truth is, I took you for a couple of those beastly tourists who come here to picnic, and leave their scraps of greasy paper and chicken-bones and things all over the place, don't you know?"

"I suppose that must be what we look like," observed Chris meekly. "One isn't flattered, but one is glad to know the truth."

"Are you in the habit of stoning stray tourists?" Gerald inquired. "If you are, and if you often hit them, I should think you would find it rather an expensive amusement."

"Oh, I knew I shouldn't hit you," Ellacombe

answered. "I didn't intend to do that : I only wanted to attract your attention. And as for your looking like tourists, Miss Compton, I assure you you didn't look like anything from up there. All I saw was a couple of strangers, and of course, I never thought of its being you, alone with—with my friend Severne."

The last words were spoken so savagely that Chris began to laugh ; whereupon Gerald laughed also, and finally Ellacombe himself joined in a dubious sort of way in their merriment.

"Well," resumed the latter, after a pause, "since you *are* here, I hope you'll come up and have a look at my old barrack. There isn't much to show you ; but the housekeeper will get you some tea, and you can walk home across the fields. It won't take you five minutes to get up the cliff," he added persuasively.

Gerald looked reluctant ; but Chris thought she would rather like to see Hatherford Manor, and as at that time Chris enjoyed an absolute despotic power over both men, it was not long before they were mounting the path by which Mr. Ellacombe had effected his rapid descent. From the summit of the cliff they descried Lord Forfar and Lady Grace, to whom they made

signals to join them ; and so, after a walk of about a quarter of an hour, the whole party entered that bare and desolate drawing-room where Mr. Ellacombe's mother had been wont to receive the neighbouring nobility and gentry in days gone by.

The present owner of Hatherford had not been unduly modest in stating that he had little to show his friends therein. It was a large and rather sombre edifice, built of grey stone, and surrounded by a neglected garden. The exterior was more or less imposing by reason of its size ; but the reception-rooms had not even that merit. To be sure, there were a good many of them, but they were comparatively small, they had low ceilings, they were shabbily furnished, and had a dreary, uninhabited look.

"I live in my own den : I never put my nose in here from year's end to year's end," Ellacombe explained apologetically, as he conducted Chris through the ground-floor suite and pointed out to her a few pictures which he said were "considered good by the fellows who know about those things."

"I don't wonder at it," returned Chris frankly. "I wouldn't live all by myself in a huge place like this for any money."

"Well," said Ellacombe, "I don't know that

I particularly enjoy living alone ; but I dare say it's a little better than marrying some woman who doesn't know a horse from a cow, or a spaniel from a bull-dog."

Chris agreed that perhaps it was ; whereupon her interlocutor heaved a prodigious sigh and remarked, " It would be different if all women were like you, Miss Compton."

The entrance of the butler with the tea-tray interrupted a colloquy which threatened to become embarrassing. Lady Grace poured out the tea, and very bad tea it was. Probably it was a beverage not often asked for in that house.

" I'm afraid it's too weak, or too strong, or something," Ellacombe said anxiously. " I'm not a tea-drinker myself."

Perhaps it was rather rude of Gerald Severne to break into an abrupt laugh at this speech ; but Gerald, poor fellow, was not in the best of humours. While Chris was being shown the Claudes and Rembrandts collected by some defunct Ellacombe of artistic proclivities, he had been wandering about the drawing-room, and had been annoyed by the sight of a printed invitation-card which lay upon one of the tables — " The Countess of Barnstaple requests the pleasure of Mr. Ellacombe's company at dinner,

on Thursday, the 10th inst., at eight o'clock." To Gerald this missive appeared altogether uncalled-for, and he began to doubt whether his mother was the superior woman that he had always hitherto imagined her to be. He said to himself: "It's downright disgusting! Fancy making up to a drunken sweep like that just because he has a few thousands a year! She must know perfectly well, too, that he isn't fit to associate with any lady."

So when Mr. Ellacombe confessed that he didn't like tea, Gerald Severne laughed offensively, and the laugh was followed by an uncomfortable interval of silence. Chris probably did not understand why her entertainer scowled so ferociously; but during the succeeding quarter of an hour she could not help seeing that Gerald was trying hard to pick a quarrel with him, which made her treat him with more cordiality than she might otherwise have shown.

By the time that Ellacombe had exhibited his stables and kennels he was in high spirits, and felt that he could afford to pity and despise his rival. "I shall see you again on Thursday," he said to Chris, when he shook hands with her and bade her good-bye: "I'm going to dine at your place."

As the party walked away, Gerald muttered

something which Chris did not catch, and which she begged him to repeat. He did not see fit to comply with her request, so she remarked: "I think you are rather ill-natured. Mr. Ellacombe seems to me to be a rough diamond."

"Then the sooner he is cut the better," retorted Gerald, with a brilliant flash of wit, which somehow failed to provoke any appreciative laughter.

## CHAPTER VII.

WHEN one has taken up diplomacy as a profession one should surely strive to acquire at all events so much of diplomatic skill as is implied in an elementary acquaintance with the foibles of humanity ; but a good many young men, it may be surmised, enter that branch of the public service rather by reason of its social advantages than because they feel in themselves any special aptitude for its duties ; and if Gerald Severne should ever become an ambassador, his name is not very likely to be added to the short list of Englishmen who have achieved renown in that capacity. He ought not to have been in the least astonished at his mother's good nature in planning a match between Mr. Ellacombe and Chris Compton, and he ought to have known that the very best way of defeating such a design was to lend it every ostensible support ; for really Ellacombe was an impossible sort of person when he was

not upon his good behaviour, and each fresh opportunity that was given him of associating with his neighbours must diminish the probability of his being able to sustain an unnatural character.

But Gerald was not wise enough or philosophical enough to reason in this way; so he said to his mother: "You've done it this time and no mistake! Do you mean to say that you really didn't know that everybody about here gave up asking Ellacombe to dinner long ago? He is just as certain to get screwed and kick up a row as you are to say your prayers to-night. More certain, if anything."

"You are a very rude boy," returned Lady Barnstaple, laughing good-humouredly: "I wish I could feel sure that you neglected your devotions as little as I do mine. As for Mr. Ellacombe, you mustn't allow him to get screwed, as you call it. You can easily prevent him from taking more than is good for him."

"I don't quite see how. If he wants to fill his glass, he'll fill it, I suppose; and then the chances are that he'll insult one of your guests. It would have been so simple to leave the man alone!"

But Lady Barnstaple was not alarmed. She did not think that Mr. Ellacombe would

disgrace himself at her table, whatever his ordinary habits might be : she was pretty sure that he was smitten with Chris, and she saw no reason why Chris should not be smitten with him. He was young, rich, athletic, and the general effect of him was by no means so bad. A little florid, perhaps ; but one must not expect to find Apollo Belvederes in every parish. And so when, on the appointed evening, Mr. Ellacombe entered her drawing-room, he produced a favourable impression upon one who was ready to be favourably impressed. "Quite tidy," she muttered under her breath, after taking a rapid survey of him ; and in truth there was not much fault to be found with his person or costume.

There was not much fault to be found with his manners either. Gerald Severne was pleased to speak of him as if he had been a half-civilised being, and Chris had more charitably called him a rough diamond ; but in reality he had had some experience of the ways of modern society, and only shunned that of his equals in the county because, in his opinion, they were a dull, censorious and quarrelsome lot. He was not awkward, nor was he in any way abashed by the presence of the smart people whom Lady Barnstaple was entertaining.

His hostess introduced him to some of them, and he seemed to have no difficulty in finding subjects to talk to them about. If he was not a particularly attentive listener, that was because of reasons which everybody at once understood and pardoned. The red-bearded man, they thought, was evidently going to marry Lady Barnstaple's pretty little friend: no wonder he could not take his eyes off her, and sometimes answered at random when addressed.

From the moment that dinner was announced this small shortcoming on his part ceased to be noticeable; for it need hardly be said that he was told to give his arm to Miss Compton. Gerald, whom the cruel laws of precedence forced to escort an ancient dowager, watched Chris and her neighbour from the far end of the table and was painfully surprised by the sobriety of the one and the animation of the other. Of course he did not want Ellacombe to get drunk and make a scene; but he certainly did not want Chris to find the fellow entertaining, and he was at a loss to conceive what they could be talking about that should cause her to find him so. If he had overheard their conversation he would have been in some measure reassured, for it was not of a sentimental nature.

"As you are so fond of horses and dogs," Chris was saying, "I wonder you don't try to make friends of them. It seems to me that you treat them like slaves."

"But that is just what they are," returned Ellacombe. "A horse doesn't allow you to put a bit in his mouth and get upon his back because he loves you: he submits because he is afraid of you, and fancies you are stronger than you really are."

"I should be sorry to think that," said Chris.

"You may depend upon it that it is the truth, Miss Compton; and I assure you that neither horses nor dogs dislike a master who can make them obey him."

"And can you make all horses obey you?"

"Nine out of ten, I should say. There are a few exceptional brutes whom one has to sell."

"If I were a horse," remarked Chris, "you would have to sell me."

"Should I? Then I am glad you are not a horse; for I am sure I should prefer to keep you."

"That sounds flattering; but I shouldn't care to be your slave, or anybody's slave."

"You are in no danger, Miss Compton,"

returned Ellacombe, with a short sigh. "Men will be your slaves : you won't be theirs."

Chris put that aspect of the question by, and went on to insist upon her favourite theory that the lower animals ask nothing better than to serve us ; and that when they fail to serve us properly it is simply because we have not the skill or the patience to make them understand what we want.

Ellacombe listened to her good-humouredly. She was talking nonsense, he thought ; but her nonsense was prettily expressed, and such ideas, however intrinsically absurd, were becoming in a woman. The fact is that he had always classed women themselves among the lower animals, and had treated them precisely in the same way as he treated his horses and his dogs. In the face of what one sees every day, one cannot venture to deny that such a mode of treatment is frequently successful ; but there are exceptional women, just as there are exceptional brutes, and Ellacombe had wit enough to perceive that the girl whom he had almost made up his mind to marry was not one whom it would be wise to bully.

Nor indeed, so long as he retained his wits, had he any inclination at all to be wanting in respect to her. The unfortunate thing for him

was that he could not retain his wits under the influence of champagne. Gerald had been guilty of no exaggeration in asserting that the county in general had given up asking Mr. Ellacombe to dinner. Wine affects some men in one way and some in another, and to every man's character there is, of course, a good and a bad side. Poor Ellacombe's neighbours no longer invited him to dine with them because the bad side of his character was very bad indeed, and because it displayed itself with offensive prominence when he was half-tipsy. Moreover it did not take a great many glasses of champagne to make him half-tipsy. Thus Chris became conscious of a gradual change in his manner, the cause of which she did not at all understand, but which was eminently distasteful to her.

"Come out for a ride with me some day, won't you?" said he, with something unpleasantly like a wink. "I'll take you for a jolly good gallop across the moor, and show you more of the country than you'd ever see with that beggar Severne. His notion of riding is peacocking along the high road, I expect."

"Mr. Severne rides very well: we don't generally keep to the road," answered Chris. Presently she added, "I dare say he would

have no objection to your joining us some day, if you choose ; but Lady Barnstaple would not allow me to ride alone with you—even if I wished it.”

The misguided Ellacombe winked again, and this time his wink was unmistakable. “Don’t you believe it,” said he : “old Lady Barnstaple is pretty wide awake, and she’ll let you ride with *me* just as often as you like. She’s a precious deal more likely to forbid you to ride with her son, I can tell you ! The old lady wasn’t born yesterday—nor was I, for the matter of that. I know very well why I was asked to dine here to-night.”

There was a short pause, during which Chris contemplated her neighbour with undisguised astonishment and with a vague suspicion that he had suddenly gone out of his mind. “Why were you asked to dine here, Mr. Ellacombe ?” she asked at length.

He laughed rather foolishly and made no reply. He had not drunk so much wine but that he was conscious of having said something which would have been better left unsaid ; but he had drunk enough not to care. He drank a little more and was proportionately exhilarated. “What’s the odds !” he exclaimed. “Let’s enjoy ourselves and allow the old women to

scheme and plot till they're black in the face, if it amuses 'em. Only, if they think I don't see through their little dodges as well as anybody, they make a mistake, that's all."

After that, Chris thought she would have to give Mr. Ellacombe up. She did not know that he was in a state of semi-intoxication; but she could not misunderstand his meaning and she regretted having ever imagined that such a boor could be tamed by civility. "I suppose," she reflected, "that he judges of his animals by his own feelings. He is wrong about them; but he is quite right about himself, and if I were a man I shouldn't at all mind giving him a sound horsewhipping." So she turned her shoulder towards him and talked to the elderly gentleman on her right hand, who was very willing to be so distinguished.

All this Gerald saw, and drew his own deductions. If disagreeable things happen, it is some consolation to have foretold them, and if, in spite of one's predictions, they don't happen, one is glad to have been wrong; so that it is obviously every one's wisest course to be the prophet of evil. Gerald was perhaps not quite as sorry as he ought to have been that his mother's guest had indulged too freely in champagne; but he was afraid that something

rude had been said to Miss Compton, and that made him not only very sorry but very angry. Consequently, when the ladies left the dining-room he was as ready to fall foul of Ellacombe as any one in the position of a host can be.

Ellacombe, for his part, was ready and willing for the fray. He, unfortunately, was both quarrelsome and boastful in his cups, and after having swallowed three glasses of port in quick succession, he gave a free rein to each of these evil propensities. Somebody having made an innocent remark about the Devon and Somerset staghounds, he must needs begin to narrate his experiences with that well-known pack, and give a vivid description of a perfectly impossible leap which he stated that he had taken while following them during the previous season. His anecdote was received with chilling silence; but he did not seem to be much chilled. He took a deliberate survey of his audience and found that each member of it was staring steadily at the table-cloth, with the exception of Gerald, who looked impatient and annoyed.

"It strikes me, Severne," said he, speaking with a slight thickness of utterance, yet quite distinctly, "that you don't believe that story."

"I don't know anything about it," answered

Gerald shortly. "I wasn't there; and I have never, that I can remember, seen the place you mention."

"Then, my good friend, I don't see why you should doubt my word."

"No one is doubting your word. Would you mind passing the wine, Ellacombe?"

Ellacombe, after filling his glass, complied, remarking solemnly: "I can stand a man who looks supercilious at me, because I know the chances are that he's only an ass, who fancies himself without any reason; but hang me if I can stand a man who calls me a liar! That's the sort of thing," he explained, turning to his neighbour, "which nobody can be expected to stand."

Gerald took no notice of this observation. Some of his guests were sniggering behind their hands: all of them of course understood that Mr. Ellacombe was no longer responsible for his words. Nevertheless, it was not pleasant to know that this tipsy idiot would shortly be let loose upon the ladies in the drawing-room, and that there was one lady in particular beside whom he was pretty certain to seat himself. "All I can do," thought Gerald, "is to keep an eye upon him, and remove him if he becomes intolerable."

Ellacombe had not the slightest idea that he was likely to be found intolerable by anybody. He had for a moment thought of trying to provoke an altercation with his host ; but he forgot all about that when the other men rose from the table and moved towards the adjoining room. As Gerald had anticipated, he made straight for the corner where Chris was seated, talking to Lady Grace and holding Peter upon her knees. His bemused intelligence was conscious of little more than that Miss Compton was the prettiest and nicest girl he had ever seen, that old Lady Barnstaple wanted him to marry her, that he was quite inclined to oblige Lady Barnstaple, and that the best way of making love to a woman is to do so boldly. That, according to Mr. Ellacombe's experience, was what they all liked. Some of them might pretend that they didn't ; but their pretences could hardly impose upon an old hand.

Lady Grace got up somewhat hastily and fled when this big, red-bearded man, whose cheeks were flushed and whose gait was not quite steady, drew near ; and he dropped down at once into the chair which she had vacated. He snapped his finger and thumb at Peter, who acknowledged the salutation by bristling up and uttering a short, low growl. Then he bent

forward and murmured insinuatingly to Chris, "I say, don't be cross."

Thereupon Chris also bristled up, after her fashion. "I don't know what you mean, Mr. Ellacombe," she said.

"Oh, yes, you do," he returned, with a loud laugh. "You were cross, or you thought you ought to make believe to be cross, because I asked you to ride with me. Lord bless your soul! I understand all that; and what's the good of humbugging? I like you awfully, you know, and old Mother Barnstaple approves, and what more would you have? I'll come round and fetch you to-morrow, if that will do."

"What is the matter with you?" exclaimed Chris, turning an astonished and indignant pair of eyes upon him. "Are you crazy? Or do you really mean to be insolent?"

"You ain't as angry as you want me to think," retorted Ellacombe, still laughing and nodding his head knowingly. "Come, now!—shall it be to-morrow?"

He drew his chair closer to hers and laid his hand upon her knee, while he pushed his rubicund visage forward. This liberty was too much for Peter, who started up, snarling and showing every tooth in his head.

"Get out, you brute!" shouted Ellacombe,

with a sweeping back-hander which caught Peter just behind the ear.

The next instant a terrier of small proportions, but some tenacity of grip, had got him securely by the forearm ; and that terrier was not shaken off until Mr. Ellacombe had received one of those marks of regard which last a lifetime.

There was a little disturbance and there were some cries of alarm from the ladies ; but the whole thing was very soon over, and before Ellacombe could open his lips he found himself outside in the hall, whither he had been hurried by Gerald Severne, who said : " You had better come up to my dressing-room and wash your arm. If you would like to be cauterised, I shall be very happy to do it for you." And in truth Gerald felt that he could perform that operation with the utmost satisfaction.

" Rot ! " growled Ellacombe ; " cauterised indeed ! I've been bitten often enough before now, and never bothered my head about it. If you've got a little sticking-plaster, that's as much as I shall want of you."

In the course of about ten minutes the wound had been washed and bound up, and Mr. Ellacombe declared himself ready to return to

the drawing-room. "Infernal little beast!" he muttered, adding some stronger expressions which need not be recorded: "I'll break his head for this!"

"I shouldn't advise you to do that," answered Gerald calmly: "you might get your own head broken if you did. And look here, Ellacombe, I shouldn't advise you to go back to the drawing-room either."

"Eh? Why not?" asked Ellacombe, savagely.

"Because you're drunk, my good fellow—that's why. To-morrow morning when you are sober you can take any notice you please of that; but you won't have a second chance of being impertinent to a lady to-night. I've ordered your dog-cart, and, if necessary, I can get half-a-dozen men to put you into it; but for your own sake I think you had better go quietly."

Possibly Ellacombe had been in some degree sobered by his adventure: at all events he offered no further resistance, but, after staring stupidly for a moment, made his way down stairs, muttering under his breath, was helped into his coat, and departed.

An hour later Gerald took occasion to remark to his mother: "I trust you are now convinced

that Mr. Ellacombe isn't a man who can be asked to dinner with impunity."

Lady Barnstaple was rather crestfallen. "I suppose he really did take a little too much," she observed. "They all say so, though I didn't notice it myself. However, he has got badly bitten for his pains, poor man!"

"Not half as badly as he deserved. One thing, at any rate, there can be no doubt that he deserves, and that is to be shut out of your house for the future."

"Oh, my dear Gerald, there is no occasion to take such strong measures. After all, what heaps of men one knows who have been rather wild at first and have afterwards settled down into exemplary husbands and fathers. There is the Duke of ——"

"I don't care if all the dukes in England began by being sots," interrupted Gerald impatiently. "That fellow isn't fit to enter the same room with Miss Compton; and if you don't choose to warn her against him, I shall."

"Really, Gerald——"

"Really, mother, I mean it and I'll do it. She is too good and too innocent to understand the sickening code of morality which we have chosen to adopt; and unless somebody

interferes to save her, Heaven only knows what she may not be talked into doing. I'd rather not, for several reasons, be the one to enlighten her, but if nobody else will, I must."

Then, all of a sudden, Lady Barnstaple perceived what she really might have perceived a little earlier. It was creditable to her wisdom that she made no comment upon her discovery, but took up her bedroom-candlestick, heaved a profound sigh, and, after wishing her son good-night, went up stairs.

## CHAPTER VIII.

It was perhaps just as well for Mr. Ellacombe that he yielded to Gerald's representations and went away without showing himself again in the drawing-room; for had he done as he felt inclined, he would have met with a very unfriendly reception from Chris, whose tenderest feelings he had managed to wound by his unheard-of conduct to Peter. She had been very angry with him for his impertinence to herself, but she was furious with him for having dared to lift up his hand against her dog; and the circumstance that her dog had shown himself remarkably well able to retaliate did not, in her eyes, at all purge the offender of his guilt.

"He is an utterly detestable man, and I hope I shall never see him again," she said to Lady Grace, who wanted to know what he had done to rouse Peter's ire.

However by the next morning she had so far

forgiven him that she had ceased to think about him. Her spirits and her temper were alike excellent when she went down stairs to breakfast, and she was free from any presentiment of coming trouble. She did not even imagine that anything disagreeable was going to be said to her, when, after she had satisfied a healthy appetite, Lady Barnstaple took her affectionately by the arm and led her into the library ; which shows how ignorant of women and things she must have been, for an old lady seldom takes a young one affectionately by the arm unless she means to say something very disagreeable indeed.

Lady Barnstaple began by observing that experience had taught her the folly of beating about the bush. One could not always tell the whole truth, but whenever it was possible to do so the truth ought to be told, however unpalatable it might chance to be. Otherwise complications were apt to arise which a few plain words, honestly spoken, might have averted at the outset.

Chris having signified her assent to this general proposition, the old lady cleared her throat and went on : " You know, my dear child, I take a great interest in your welfare, both for your poor father's sake and for your own, and

few things would give me more sincere pleasure than to see you well and suitably married."

Chris said, "Thank you, Lady Barnstaple; but I don't think I very much want to marry anybody just yet."

"You mean of course that you would prefer to wait until you are asked. That is quite right; but what every girl ought to be cautioned against is marrying—or at least accepting—the first man who may happen to ask her."

"One is drawn into it sometimes," remarked Chris, with a sigh, thinking of a certain quasi-engagement which she had as yet confided to nobody.

"Just so, that is exactly what I mean. Men fall desperately in love with a pretty face—you can't help knowing that. Yours is a pretty face, and I am only making myself the echo of your looking-glass in telling you so—I say, men fall in love with pretty faces, and they express themselves in impassioned terms, and the owners of the faces are naturally flattered, and often, unfortunately for themselves, give all that is asked of them without even considering what they are likely to receive in return. Now, my dear Chris, do you think you can trust me sufficiently to believe me when I tell you that a lover and a husband are two totally different

beings ? A lover may be this, that, or the other : so long as he says ' I love you ' loudly enough and often enough, he will do very well for most people. But a husband, if he is to be at all satisfactory, must have other qualifications—a good temper, a good moral character, above and beyond all an ample income. It sounds prosaic, I know ; but upon the whole one looks rather to prose than to poetry for a simple and straightforward statement of facts."

Chris began to laugh. " I think I understand what you mean," said she, " and it is kind of you to put me on my guard. But really there is no need. I am not going to marry Mr. Ellacombe, even if he asks me."

With an outburst of engaging candour, Lady Barnstaple confessed that her remarks had not been intended to apply to Mr. Ellacombe. Mr. Ellacombe was not perfect, but perhaps he was no worse than his neighbours, and his income, at any rate, was a good solid fact. " He offended you last night, I know ; and far be it from me to fight his battles for him. I would not for the world influence your choice in any way. But, my dear, you have another admirer in this house, as I daresay you already know. I don't think I can show you any greater kindness than by warning you, while it is still time,

that Gerald can never marry you. He is of age, and he may propose to you and talk the customary nonsense about waiting until he is better off; but his father would certainly not sanction the engagement, and he can't afford to marry upon his present means. One knows how that sort of thing ends. The man gets off scot-free and the girl is cast adrift, after having been bound down to refuse all offers during two or three of the best years of her life."

There was a good deal of common sense in this speech; but feminine instinct made Chris perfectly well aware that it was prompted rather by selfishness than by benevolence. She reddened and replied—perhaps a little over-hastily—"You have no reason to be frightened, Lady Barnstaple. I dare say it would make you more comfortable to know that I am engaged already. Don't repeat it to anybody, please; but I *am* engaged in—in a sort of a way to Mr. Richardson. You remember him at Cannes?"

"That vulgar young man!" exclaimed Lady Barnstaple, really shocked. "My dear girl, you mustn't think of such a thing! But only in a sort of a way, you say. That, I suppose, means that you don't intend to marry him?"

There was a pause, during which Chris

looked down at her fingers and turned round the diamond and sapphire rings which had belonged to her mother. "I don't know," she answered at length. "He was very kind to me, and he wishes it, though he said I was not to consider myself bound. I only promised that I would let him know before I engaged myself to anybody else."

"Ah, there it is!" observed Lady Barnstaple, with an intonation which expressed relief and disappointment in something like equal proportions. "Such an engagement as that is no engagement at all: one can scarcely call it even a safeguard." She added sorrowfully: "I have never wished to get rid of Gerald before, but I wish with all my heart that his father would telegraph for him now."

Chris could not help being a little angry. There was only one thing to be done, and she was quite willing to do it; but she thought that, if ever she should be in a position to play the part of hostess, she would submit to any inconvenience or peril rather than convey such a hint to one of her guests. However she summoned up a smile and said briskly: "Wouldn't it be almost as well if I were to telegraph to Aunt Rebecca? Then I could leave by the first train to-morrow."

"Oh, my dear child," cried Lady Barnstaple, "I never meant to suggest that! As long as you can enjoy yourself and amuse yourself here, I-am sure we are only too happy to keep you."

No very great display of obstinacy however was required to persuade her ladyship that, in all the circumstances, she had better allow her visitor to depart. She was grateful, she was a little ashamed, and not a little apologetic; but she did not refuse to despatch a groom with the requisite telegram to Miss Ramsden, and she breathed more freely after she had seen the man gallop away.

"You must come back to us later in the year, my dear," she said to Chris, whom she kissed affectionately on both cheeks; "and in the meantime pray do not let yourself be drawn into any further entanglement with Mr. Richardson. I can't tell you how distressed I should be if you were to throw yourself away upon such a man."

The above colloquy was held before luncheon, and during that meal Lady Barnstaple took occasion to announce the decision which had been arrived at. "Chris says she is going to run away from us to-morrow. It is too bad of her, but we must hope to tempt her back again in the autumn."

Such was the formula which commended itself to the anxious mother, and which, it may safely be asserted, imposed upon nobody. Every one, including Gerald, understood quite well that the young lady had had a hint to go; and every one, except Gerald, who was furious, looked sorry for her—which was a hard thing to bear. The difficulty was how to get through the afternoon without giving Mr. Severne an opportunity of expressing his indignation, or any other sentiment that he may have desired to express. Lady Barnstaple, who doubtless perceived this, considerately offered to take Chris out for a drive; and a sufficiently wearisome two hours our poor heroine had of it, sitting with her back to the horses, while her hostess and another old lady discoursed about the difficulty of rearing young turkeys, and the absurd prices that people were giving for orchids, and the maladies of their respective grandchildren.

Meanwhile Gerald was taking a solitary walk and trying to make up his mind what he ought to do. His father allowed him five hundred a year and made him an occasional present of a hundred pounds, upon which modest income he had hitherto contrived to subsist and to keep out of debt. But even if Miss Compton had

as much of her own—which was improbable—he would scarcely be justified in asking her to be his wife, for the diplomatic service is practically an unpaid profession. That being so, it might seem that his proper course was tolerably clear, and that he had only to abstain from asking her to be his wife; but when one is desperately in love, when one feels—as everybody must feel at such times—capable of making any personal sacrifice for the sake of the beloved object, and when one is disposed towards a humble conviction that she ought at least to be allowed a chance of displaying similar self-abnegation, it is not so easy to sit still and bow to the dictates of prudence. Thus it was that by dinner-time Mr. Severne had reached no decision, and was very willing to become the victim of circumstances.

Circumstances however did not claim him in that capacity. Chris was separated from him by something like the whole length of the dinner-table, and later in the evening she took very good care to avoid being left alone with him. A steady drizzling rain—one of those downpours which obscure North Devon while other counties are conscious only of cloudy weather—precluded all possibility of a walk upon the terrace, and Lady Grace, by whose

side Chris had seated herself, did not seem to understand the impatient signals made to her by her brother. He had to make the best of a bad business and content himself with asking whether he might call upon Miss Compton when he passed through London.

"I am afraid you would never find your way to the place where we live," she answered ; and he could not get her to tell him where that was. "Besides," she added, "I am very seldom at home in the afternoon. Peter and I go out for long walks and don't return until nightfall."

Men who are in love are easily snubbed, and long before the evening was over Gerald Severne was convinced that even if he had been a millionaire there would have been no sort of hope for him. "I trust we may meet again some day, Miss Compton," was all that he could say, as he wished her good-night with a sigh.

To which she responded cheerfully : "Oh, yes, I hope we may. But I'm afraid it isn't particularly likely."

Brentstow being at some distance from a railway station, Chris had to make an early start on the following morning. Gerald of course rose early in order to see the last of her ; but he did not gain much by that, since

his mother and sister had done likewise, and it was under their watchful eyes that his adieux had to be spoken. As soon as the carriage had disappeared he strode away, announcing that he was going out fishing and would not be back before the evening.

"I always thought," remarked Lady Barnstaple, as she re-entered the house, "that one required a rod, or at the very least a line, to catch fish; but no matter! If he catches nothing, we must console ourselves with the reflection that ~~he~~ he has escaped being caught."

Although Gerald did not overhear this speech, he was almost as angry with the ladies of his family as if he had. They had treated him abominably, he thought, and he determined to see no more of them that day. But whether one's heart be whole or broken, one cannot possibly sit for more than a certain number of hours upon a rock, doing nothing and staring across the Bristol Channel; and so it came to pass that, about three o'clock in the afternoon, Lady Grace, who had ensconced herself in a hammock on the lawn and was lazily glancing at one of the weekly papers, became aware of a haggard and dejected young man, who said reproachfully: "We've always been pretty good friends up to now, Gracie: I

don't know what I've done that you should turn against me like this."

Lady Grace jumped out of her hammock and protested against so unjust a charge. How, she wanted to know, could she be said to have turned against her brother when she had not even been informed of what his wishes were?

"If that's all," Gerald replied, "I can very soon tell you." And forthwith he took her unreservedly into his confidence.

Lady Grace was by no means hard-hearted. She was fond of Chris, she was devoted to her brother, and she was quite capable of enjoying a little bit of romance. But at the same time she could not deceive herself as to matters of fact, and it seemed to her that the obstacle of pounds, shillings, and pence was an insuperable one. Therefore she confined herself to expressions of sympathy, and would not say what in her heart she was inclined to believe, that, but for the aforesaid obstacle, her brother would have had no reason to despair. So persuaded, indeed, was she that no good could come of this unlucky attachment that she even went a step farther and, in accordance with the universal feminine custom, revealed in strict confidence something which she had promised not to

reveal, and which had been revealed to her by some one who had made a similar promise.

"Do you mean that she is engaged to the man?" Gerald asked, when he had been informed of the existence of Mr. Valentine Richardson.

"Well, we hope not; because he is a dissipated sort of youth, with no means and apparently no belongings. Probably her relations wouldn't let her marry him. But mamma says that she has in a manner bound herself to him, and one can only suppose that she must like him."

Gerald groaned. "If she does care for the man," said he, "I hope she will marry him, in spite of her relations and friends. At the worst, he would be better than Ellacombe."

Lady Grace was unable to agree. Mr. Ellacombe, she observed, if he had not much character, had at least money enough to support a wife, which Mr. Richardson had not; and Gerald was pointing out to her in vehement language how atrocious and ignoble a thing it is in a woman to set wealth above love, when his eloquence was interrupted by the sudden appearance upon the scene of Mr. Ellacombe in person.

Ellacombe was sober and sorry: he had

ridden over in order to say so. With scarcely any preface, he made so abject an apology for his conduct that even Gerald's hard heart was softened, and his consternation on hearing that Miss Compton had gone away almost made the young diplomatist sympathise with him. "We are in the same boat," Gerald thought: "neither of us is going to win, so we needn't be jealous of one another."

"My dear fellow," he said, when the contrite Ellacombe declared that he could not go away without having begged Lady Barnstaple's pardon, "don't bother yourself any more about it. It's all right. My mother noticed nothing, and I'm sure she would much rather you didn't speak to her upon the subject."

But Ellacombe insisted; and as, while they were talking, Lady Barnstaple came in from her drive, he hastened to the front-door and intercepted her with a very humble entreaty for a five minutes' interview.

His request was of course granted; and after he had abased himself and had been assured that, so far as his late hostess was concerned, he was fully pardoned, he ventured to inquire what chance there was of Miss Compton's proving equally generous.

"I know I made a beast of myself, and I

know she thought so," he said dejectedly ; " but after all, it's one of those things which might happen to anybody, isn't it ? "

" I don't know," answered Lady Barnstaple ; " but I must say that I shouldn't advise you to let it happen to you again in her presence. "

" I give you my word of honour that I won't ! " cried Ellacombe earnestly. " Lady Barnstaple, I'm sure you understand how it is with me, and that you know I'd cut off my right hand sooner than offend Miss Compton. And—and I fancy that you don't altogether disapprove of me, in spite of my having behaved so disgracefully the other night. Would you mind," he added in persuasive accents, " giving me Miss Compton's address in London ? "

Lady Barnstaple stroked her chin meditatively. She still thought that it would be in every way desirable that Chris should espouse this intemperate, but penitent landed proprietor ; yet she was not prepared to send him straight off to London to declare himself. If he did so he would assuredly be refused, and there was no telling what might not happen after that. So she said : " My dear Mr. Ellacombe, you must have a little patience. You have been dreadfully indiscreet, and I am afraid you will

have to suffer for your indiscretion. Later in the year—in October or November, perhaps—when we come back from Scotland, I hope to be here again for a few weeks, and I shall try and get Miss Compton to stay with us. Then—well, then you must take your chance. I need hardly tell you that she is her own mistress, and that I would on no account assume the responsibility of influencing her for or against you. Meanwhile you had better allow her a little time to forget that you were bitten by her dog. Why he bit you I'm sure I don't know; but by your own account he had some provocation. The wisest plan is to let the bite and the provocation both heal."

Ellacombe, impatient though he was, was disposed to think that there was sound sense in that counsel. He thanked Lady Barnstable profusely and took his leave with a lightened heart.

Gerald, who saw him ride away, said to his sister: "Look here, Gracie, that fellow hasn't given up the game. I know it by the way he sits his horse. Now, if he doesn't despair, I needn't; and what I want to know is whether you mean to be upon my mother's side or mine."

"Oh, well," answered Lady Grace, laughing ;  
"if it comes to that, I suppose I shall be upon  
yours. But you will have forgotten all about  
poor Chris before you have bagged half-a-dozen  
brace of grouse."

## CHAPTER IX.

IT was not without some soreness of spirit that Chris left her friends in Devonshire—leaving them, as she felt that she was doing, for ever. It had been kind of Lady Barnstaple to speak of having her back in the autumn : they had all been kind to her from the very first ; but she did not intend to return to them. Despite their kindness, they had shown her, intentionally or unintentionally, that she was not of their class, a fact which had never been brought home to her during her father's lifetime. If they had not said in so many words, they had at least hinted that she had made an attempt to fascinate a member of their family, and that such attempts could not be tolerated for a moment. "No," thought Chris, "I shall never see Brentstow again. If I am not their equal I would much rather not associate with them." And this was sad enough ; because she

had been very happy at Brentstow. When, all of a sudden, she found her eyes full of tears and brushed them impatiently away, she attributed that momentary weakness to regret at bidding a long farewell to Lady Grace and to a part of England which had taken her fancy. Assuredly she had nothing else to cry about.

Nevertheless, she would not have been inexcusable if she had wept a little out of sheer self-pity at the outlook before her. The idea of spending the early autumn in London would be appalling enough to most people: to spend that season in a dismal little house on Primrose Hill with a miserly old woman who denied herself and those about her all the comforts of civilised existence is a trial which, one would fain hope, no reader of these pages will ever be called upon to face. But Chris, who had to face it, wisely determined to do so without repining; and although it is true that her heart sank a little as she drew near the end of her journey, and the murky atmosphere of the great city became perceptible, she said to Peter, whom a civil guard had allowed her to keep with her, that they would pull through somehow.

Peter rubbed his rough head against her and raised his honest eyes, and gave her to understand that such was also his view. He did not

like London—what dog does?—but he was content to be where his mistress was, which is more than can be said for the generality of human friends.

Ugly old Martha had a grin of welcome for the weary traveller, and whispered: "I'll bring you a nice cup of 'ot tea to your bedroom directly: there's nothing but a bit of cold boiled mutton for your supper down stairs."

But Martha's mistress was less gracious. "I can't understand your ways of going on, Christina," Miss Ramsden began querulously, the moment that she caught sight of her-niece. "You seem to delight in shaking my nerves with telegrams. You might have sent a letter for a penny; and anybody but you would have done it. However, I suppose you can't be happy unless you are throwing away money: it's only what might have been expected."

Chris explained that her departure from Brentstow had been decided upon rather hastily.

"Why?" inquired the old lady sharply. "What need was there of haste?"

This being an awkward question to answer, Chris left it unanswered, which provoked her aunt into remarking: "You outstayed your welcome, no doubt. I can't say I am surprised

at that : it isn't everybody who would put up with your caprices as I do."

What she meant it was rather difficult to understand : probably she meant nothing at all, except that she was out of temper and would like to relieve her feelings by a comfortable quarrel. But Chris, not having been brought up among women, and comprehending little of their queer ways, forbore to request an explanation from her aunt, who called her a sulky girl and went grumbling off to bed.

Miss Ramsden was always grumbling, and all the patience and forbearance in the world would have been thrown away upon her. There was nothing for it, Chris thought, but to leave her to herself as much as possible and to remain silent when she railed at imaginary slights and affronts. That was doubtless the more dignified course to adopt ; but in some ways it would have been better to fight with the stingy, ungracious old woman, to reduce her to tears (which could have been easily done) and to make friends with her again afterwards. That was what she wanted, and that would at least have produced intervals of peace and good humour. As it was, Miss Ramsden soon began to complain bitterly of her niece's neglect.

"I did think," she would say, "that when it

was arranged that we should live together, I should gain something in the way of companionship in return for all the expense and inconvenience to which I have been put; but it seems that I am never to be allowed to see your face except at dinner-time."

To such reproaches Chris made no reply. She was willing to play *bésique* for an hour or two every evening, much as she abhorred that game; but to surrender her share of such fresh air as London has to give, to sit indoors every afternoon, with the blinds drawn down in order that the faded old carpets might be protected from the sunshine, was more than she could bring herself to undertake; and as she did not intend to concede that point, she held her tongue.

Every afternoon she and Peter wandered about the Regent's Park, and they soon became acquainted with every square yard of that not very extensive pleasure-ground. The weather was sultry, the grass was burnt up, the trees were blackened with the London soot: they were neither of them very happy in that brown oasis of theirs, amid the surrounding desert of bricks and mortar. After the first few days Peter did not care to roam about much in such an uninteresting place. He sat dejectedly

under the trees beside his mistress, while she told him her troubles, which he seemed to understand, and which were as desperately real as the troubles of young people always are. Chris even reached the point of wishing that it were not wrong to commit suicide, and wondering why it should be. Her life was of no use to her or to anybody else: from life, as she had formerly understood the term, she was hopelessly cut off; and she could no longer look forward, as she had done at first, to eventual escape from her present sordid surroundings. She had been given to understand that she did not belong to the upper class and could not be admitted into it, except upon sufferance. She knew nothing and was not likely to know anything of that which she supposed was her own. Even after she had attained her majority she would probably have to go on living with her aunt, since there was nobody else for her to live with. Sometimes she thought longingly of the Laverignes; but she had no claim upon them, and after all, they were old and might be dead before the day of her emancipation should arrive.

And so, having neither present nor future that could be reflected upon without wretchedness, her thoughts were naturally occupied for

the most part with the past ; nor was it strange that in that past the figure of Gerald Severne should fill a prominent place. She did not expect ever to see him again : he was nothing more than a memory to her, and he could not be anything less than a pleasant memory. She remembered his bright, handsome face and his manly unaffected ways, and how well they had always got on together ; and occasionally—just for a moment at a time—she wondered whether, if she had been Lady Somebody Something and an heiress, instead of being what she was it would not have been a very pleasant lot to be wooed and won by such a suitor.

Then one afternoon she had a bitter disappointment. She came in late, as usual, and as she entered the dingy little drawing-room, Miss Ramsden remarked drily : “ You have missed a visitor. A Mr. Severne, who says he is a son of your friend, Lady Barnstaple, has been here and waited a long time in hopes of seeing you ; but I told him that you could never be counted upon. I asked him whether I could deliver a message for him ; but he did not appear to have come upon any particular errand, except to give you his mother’s love and to mention that he was going to Scotland by to-night’s mail.”

Well, there was no denying that it was a disappointment. After what Lady Barnstaple had said, it was perhaps as well that she had chanced to miss Gerald; but she could not help being glad that he had not forgotten her, nor could she help wishing that she had seen him, if only for five minutes. It seemed such an age since she had exchanged a word with a sympathetic fellow-creature.

This incident had the odd and unexpected effect of making Miss Ramsden jealous. Apparently it did not strike her to regard Mr. Severne and his visit in the light in which they would have been regarded by most old women and chaperons: she saw only that her news had made Chris sad and out of spirits, and throughout the evening she bewailed herself at intervals accordingly.

"Any stranger is preferred to your nearest relations," she moaned. "You seem to be as communicative with other people as you are reticent with me; and you make complaints, I have no doubt; though what you can truthfully have to complain of I leave it to your own conscience to say. You need not deny it, Christina: I am neither blind nor deaf nor stupid, and from the way in which that young man spoke and looked this afternoon, it was

very evident that he was pitying you. Well, when your aunt is no longer with you, you will perhaps be sorry for having treated her with such ingratitude."

This last phrase became a frequent one with Miss Ramsden. She was not long for this world, she would say, and doubtless the sooner she was dead and buried the better everybody would be pleased—particularly those who were likely to inherit her small savings. She did not always speak of these savings as small. Sometimes she would hint at their being considerable, and would sigh at the prospect of their being senselessly and wickedly squandered in the course of a few years. At other times she would declare that she had next to nothing to leave; and then again that what she had would go to hospitals and charities. Chris was often tempted to retort that she would willingly resign all claim upon a doubtful future inheritance if only she might be allowed a few more present creature comforts, such as, for instance, a somewhat larger supply of clean sheets and clean table-linen; but she held her peace, knowing that no request of that kind would be granted, and that anything in the shape of a complaint would be indignantly resented.

Possibly Miss Ramsden may have been

visited by an occasional qualm of conscience ; for this is a phenomenon which is wont to exhibit itself in the most unexpected quarters. At any rate, she was haunted by an idea that her niece, who complained of nothing, had every inclination to make complaints, and she was greatly perturbed when Mrs. James Compton wrote to invite Chris to spend a day at Wimbledon.

"That lawyer man," said she, "is just like the rest of his tribe. He expects to get the value of a shilling for every sixpence that he lays out, and I am sure he will try to persuade you that I don't spend every penny I receive from him for taking charge of you. Well, you may tell him from me that if you are discontented it is no fault of mine. I have done my best ; but I can't afford to give you champagne every night upon the pittance that he allows me. You may say what you like against me, and I have no doubt you will say a great deal, but you can't honestly assert that I haven't done all I ever undertook to do."

"I shall say nothing against you, Aunt Rebecca," answered Chris. "I don't know what you are receiving, and I shall not ask. Besides, I think you are quite mistaken about my cousin. I suspect that he is only too glad

to leave me where I am, and that if I were to say I was dissatisfied he wouldn't believe me."

But Miss Ramsden refused to be conciliated. "You speak as if you had some cause for dissatisfaction," said she. "What cause have you? If you could tell me we might perhaps get on better together."

Chris, rather foolishly, answered: "Well, if you ask the question, Aunt Rebecca, I don't think I get quite enough to eat."

It was perfectly true that she did not get, nearly enough to eat, and that what she did get was often so bad of its kind as to be uneatable. But if that circumstance had to be mentioned at all, it would have been far better to mention it to Mr. Compton than to Miss Ramsden, who instantly burst out into a furious invective. "You wicked, ungrateful girl! I knew very well that you meant to traduce me, and I might have guessed that you would hit upon some accusation which cannot be disproved. The pounds and pounds that I have spent upon the butcher and poulterer since you have been here! And of course you took care to find out that I always pay ready money and have no bills to show. Well, I am rightly served! If I had had any sense I should have foreseen what your father's daughter would turn out."

Chris had an admirable temper ; but it was not her way to refuse a fight when those whom she loved were attacked. As a matter of fact, she had had no great reason to love her father ; but her life with him had been a happy one, and now that he was gone she very naturally thought he had been the most indulgent and considerate of parents.

"You can abuse me as much as you please, Aunt Rebecca," she returned : "but I will not allow you or anybody else to abuse my father."

"You will not allow ! Do you consider that a proper and respectful way to speak to your aunt ? And do you forget that you had a mother as well as a father—a mother whose fortune your father squandered ! Your father was a selfish spendthrift. He was ashamed of his wife's relations, and of his own relations, while he lived ; but he was not ashamed to leave you as a burden upon them when he died. I shall not ask your permission to give my opinion about such a man as that when I choose to give it."

By this time Miss Ramsden was very angry ; and so was Chris, who twice attempted to speak, and then, breaking down suddenly, burst into tears.

This was just what her aunt desired. There are people—women, for the most part—who love bullying, yet are not intentionally cruel, and will show plenty of amiability towards those whom their bullying has vanquished. Such people, if held down by a strong hand, pass through life decently enough, and, by reason of their moral cowardice, seldom commit any great sins ; but if circumstances render them independent, they are apt to become a curse to humanity. Miss Ramsden, having gained her victory, would not now have been unwilling to sign a treaty of peace ; but, unluckily at that moment a fresh combatant threw himself into the fray.

Peter, as has been already said, was not upon good terms with the mistress of the house. He had thought badly of her from the first, and now he saw his worst suspicions confirmed. For some minutes past he had been listening with cocked ears to her screeching, scolding voice : he had understood very well that his mistress was being assailed, and when he saw Chris sink back in her chair and cover her face with her hands, he judged that the moment had come for him to intervene. Accordingly he went straight for old Miss Ramsden's legs, whereupon a very pretty hubbub ensued. Peter was dragged off, and there was really no damage

done, except to a very ancient black alpaca gown ; but Aunt Rebecca had a fit of hysterics, and was subsequently led away to bed by Martha, who was summoned, and who slapped her on the back and applied restoratives without apparent success.

It was an unfortunate episode, and it had the effect of putting Chris in the wrong. Still she could not find it in her heart to punish Peter, who was much elated, and who, for fully ten minutes afterwards, sat nodding his head and giving little grunts, evidently saying to himself : " That's the sort of dog I am ! "

It was not without some reluctance that Chris left this faithful partizan of hers in Martha's care on the following day. " I do believe," she said, " that Aunt Rebecca is capable of keeping him all day without food."

To which Martha replied, " That she is, miss, and no wonder. But he shall 'ave his dinner ; though I do think you ought to 'ave give him a whipping. You naughty little creatur' you ! How could you beyave so ! "

But Peter, who liked Martha, knowing her to be a person of sterling qualities, rubbed himself against her and showed no signs of penitence ; and so Chris departed, feeling that he was in safe hands.

She spent a long and tedious day at the Wimbledon villa which Mr. Compton had hired for the summer months. That hard-worked gentleman did not himself appear, his avocations compelling him to leave for London early in the morning and remain there until late at night. His wife was a faded, rather peevish sort of person, and his numerous daughters were colourless both in a physical and in a metaphorical sense. In the course of the afternoon Mrs. Compton said hesitatingly : " James told me to ask you whether you were comfortable with Miss Ramsden ? " and seemed relieved when Chris replied : " Oh, yes, thank you ; tolerably comfortable. " It was evident that she had only invited her young kinswoman to pass a few hours with her because she had been ordered to do so, and that she found the hours as long as her guest did. Chris was glad to get away from them, and registered an inward vow that she would not again trespass upon their hospitality.

It was growing dark when she reached Balclava Terrace once more, and whistled twice after the peculiar fashion which Peter knew. But Peter did not come charging out of the house with a volley of short, joyous barks, as he was wont to do on those rare occasions when

he had been deserted for a time by his mistress. Only Martha stood in the doorway with an odd, scared look upon her face, and caught Chris by the arm, whispering, "Hush, miss! don't whistle for him: he can't 'ear you. The poor little dog——" She stopped short and gave a kind of gasp, which ended almost like a sob.

"What have you done with him?" asked Chris, turning pale. "Where is he?"

"Oh, miss—oh, my dear, he's dead! It was none of my doing. The Lord He knows I'd give the 'arf of what I've saved in all these years to give him back to you as you give him to me! but there! what's the good of talking? You won't forgive me, I know, nor yet I can't forgive myself. Come into the kitching, and I'll tell you all about it."

Martha had perhaps anticipated an outburst of reproaches; if so, she had misjudged the probable effect of her news. Chris followed her into the kitchen, and sat down upon one of the wooden chairs without uttering a single word; and so she had to tell her tale unaided by any of those interrogations and interpolations which are dear to women.

. Told in that way, it was the tale of a foul murder, and the case for the murderess was scarcely arguable. Miss Ramsden, it appeared,

had got up in a very bad temper, and with the memory of her wrongs of the previous night strong upon her. Coming down stairs somewhat earlier than usual, she had encountered Peter and had struck at him with her stick, whereupon he had, as she declared, flown at her and bitten her foot. Martha could not say whether this was or was not a true account of an incident which she had not witnessed, but at any rate Miss Ramsden had no wound to show. "And, my dear, I knew no more than the babe unborn what she was thinking of when she told me to get her dressed, because she was going out to the chemist's to buy some medicine; and when I see her come back, and the young man from the chemist's with her, I supposed 'twas no more than some dispute about the bill, like what she's always 'avin' with them, and that she'd brought him 'ere to show him her receipt. I was cookin' the dinner at the time, and I let Peter out o' my sight, which I never ought to 'ave done it, and the same I confess and repent of. Well, ten minutes arter that she rang for me and I went up to the droring-room—and 'twas all over. 'The pore dog was mad,' says she, 'and he 'ad to be put out o' the way. And you'd best remove the body,' says she. Well, I spoke to

Miss, Rebecca as I never thought I could have spoke to her ; but I was that angry the words come out o' theirselves, and I believe I went so fur as to give her warning, though I ain't goin' to desert her, whatever she done. And if 'tis any comfort to you to know that she's lyin' down in her bed at this moment, shakin' all over with fright——"

"Where is he?" interrupted Chris quietly.

Martha led the way into the scullery, where poor Peter lay, stiff and stark, his joys and sorrows ended for ever, and those soft, loving eyes of his, in which his mistress had so often read as much as any human tongue can speak, dull and glazed. Chris bent over him and kissed his curly head. Then, "Martha," said she, "have you a spade? I want to bury him, and there is no time to be lost."

Martha had no spade, but she had a shovel and a pick which she used for breaking coal ; and with those implements a grave was soon dug in the back-garden in which Peter's body was laid. When the work, which had been accomplished in silence, was completed, Chris knelt down and kissed her dear friend once more.

"Good-bye, dear, dead Peter!" she whispered.

"You were always good and true ; and I believe

we shall meet again, in spite of what people say. If there is a heaven for Aunt Rebecca, there must be a heaven for dogs."

"Indeed, I think so too, my dear," sobbed Martha, casting orthodoxy to the winds. "And oh, if you could forgive the pore old missus! I believe she was frightened of the dog, and I do believe she's sorry now—yes, that I do!"

"It makes no difference," answered Chris coldly, "whether she is sorry or not. I will never forgive her, and I will never, if I can help it, see her or speak to her again."

The girl's face was so pale and stern that Martha could only weep feebly and murmur: "Oh, dear, oh, dear! what ever shall we do!"

## CHAPTER X.

"MARTHA," said Chris, when the little grave had been filled in, "I left Peter in your care, and he has been killed. You say you are sorry, and I suppose you are. Do you wish to show that you are sorry?"

Poor Martha made an indescribable and somewhat grotesque gesture, which seemed to signify assent.

"Then," continued Chris, "you can do it by enabling me to escape from this house, where I would rather die than spend another night. I must begin packing at once, and you must help me, and call a cab afterwards, for we have barely an hour left."

"Oh, miss, I durstn't do it!" cried Martha, wringing her hands distractedly. "Go and lay down upon your bed, and I'll bring you a cup of tea presently; and try if you can't cry a bit,

which is the best thing for all as is in trouble ; and to-morrow——”

“ There is no time to argue ! ” interrupted Chris ; “ I mean to go, and I have money enough to pay for my journey. All you can do is to prevent my taking any clothes with me. If you won’t help me, I shall go straight off to the station as I am.”

“ But—but if I was to ’old you fast, miss ? ” suggested Martha, somewhat timorously ; for indeed she was overawed by the girl’s coolness.

Chris instantly whipped out of her pocket the long Spanish knife which José had given her. “ Martha,” said she, “ I intend to go, and I can’t answer for what I might do to any one who tried to hold me. Do you understand ? ”

“ Oh, my dear,” whimpered Martha, “ don’t look at me so ! And put away that ’orrid great knife, which it gives me quite a turn on’y to see it. But where would you go, my pore child, all by yourself ? ”

“ Perhaps I had better not tell you,” answered Chris. “ You will be asked questions, and it would be just as well that you should have no reply to give ; though I shall write to Mr. Compton as soon as I reach the place that I am bound for. I shall be with friends, and I shall be well taken care of.”

"Well," sighed Martha, "if go you must and will, to be sure there's no sense in your going with nothing but the clothes you stand up in. But why not see your aunt and say the same to her as you've said to me?"

"Because I could not endure to look at her," answered Chris shortly. "Come, Martha, if you are going to help me at all, you must do it at once." And taking the old woman by the arm, she led her back into the house and up stairs.

The reason which Chris assigned for her surreptitious flight was genuine enough, so far as it went; for she had an overpowering repugnance to the idea of facing Peter's murderess; but it was not her only reason. Miss Ramsden probably had legal power, and certainly had practical power, to detain her: she might even, if the worst came to the worst, call in the police and cause a public scandal. Whereas, if she were separated from her niece by the whole length of France, negotiations would have to be conducted through Mr. James Compton, who would be less difficult to deal with. Chris hastily consulted a continental Bradshaw, while Martha, with many subdued groans, was stuffing her clothes into her trunks, and found that she would have no chance of catching the direct

mail to Paris. It would however be quite possible for her to take the Southampton and Havre route, thus leaving London an hour later ; only it would be necessary, even so, to use the utmost despatch.

Unfortunately, Martha would not and could not be hurried. Every few minutes she stopped packing, threw herself back, sitting upon her heels, and ejaculated, " Oh, my dear, I durstn't do it !—I reelly durstn't ! " and it was only by alternate entreaties and menaces that she could be induced to resume her labours.

What gave Chris even more anxiety than the lukewarmness of her fellow-conspirator was that Miss Ramsden's bedroom was next door, and that boxes cannot be moved nor drawers opened and shut without some noise. And, sure enough, when they had nearly completed their preparations, there came three loud thumps upon the partition wall which caused them to start and exchange affrighted glances.

" There ! " exclaimed Martha, sinking despairingly into a chair, " that settles it ! Go to her I must, and what in this world I'm to say to her——"

" Listen to me, Martha," interrupted Chris, taking the woman by the shoulders and looking straight into her eyes : " I have heard you tell

Aunt Rebecca fibs before now, and I know that you can tell them very well: You will go to her now, and you will say, just whatever comes into your head, except the truth; only you are not to be away more than five minutes. If you stand by me I will reward you handsomely as soon as I can, but if you betray me——”

“Oh, laws, child,” broke in Martha, “don’t talk to me about rewards! Goodness knows it isn’t a reward I want!”

“Well, you will get a reward—of one kind or another. I am only a girl, but I am desperate; and by far the safest thing you can do is to obey me.”

Thus cautioned, Martha tottered out of the room, and Chris, having hastily locked her boxes, sat down and waited during the longest five minutes that she had ever spent in her life. Nevertheless, the allotted time had barely expired when her emissary returned, wearing an air of mingled contrition and triumph.

“Well?” asked Chris expectantly.

“Well,” answered Martha, “she don’t suspect nothin’. There! It did go against me to deceive her, and she so porely too. But I kep’ sayin’ to myself, ‘Tis for the sake of others, not for your own, that you’re carryin’ on in this scandalous way, and maybe that ’ll be took into

account.' Mortal bad she says she is ; and to be sure she do look it, ' Bin ringin' that bell for the last 'alf hour,' says she ; and then she fancied she 'eard me movin' in the next room, which was why she knock through. So I give her her medicine, and then she seems a bit easier and wants to know whether you was come in yet. ' Come in ? ' I says : ' I believe you she 'ave ! And in that tearin' and horful passion you wouldn't credit it without you was to see it. And you'd best let me get back to her as soon as I can,' I says, ' and put her safe to bed ; for 'tis my belief as she's in no state to be left alone, much less to be allowed within a harm's length of *you*.' Scared !—well, I don't know as I ever see any one look more scared than pore Miss Rebecca did at that. Began tremblin' all over, so she shook the bed under her, and, ' Don't let her in 'ere, Martha,' she says, ' don't you let her into this room, whatever you do ! ' So I puts on a blood-curdlin' sort of a voice, and says I——"

Chris cut this discursive narrative short without ceremony. " That will do, Martha : I don't want to hear what either of you said, and if I did I shouldn't have time to listen. Now run as fast as you can and call a cab, and tell the man to take off his boots in the hall before he

comes up for the boxes, because there is a lady ill in the house. Do you see?"

Off trotted Martha, still much elated by the success of her wily policy; and a few minutes later Chris had the satisfaction of hearing a cab stop at the door. The carrying of the boxes down stairs was anxious work, but no sound proceeded from Miss Ramsden's room; and while the cabman, who took an excruciating long time about it, was putting on his boots, Chris could hear Martha rehearsing under her breath the details of an interview which had not yet taken place. "'Keb?' says I. 'What are you a thinkin' of? There ain't bin no keb drove away from *this* 'ouse. You must ha' bin dreamin',' I says——"

But the old woman's view of the situation suddenly changed again at the last moment, when she thrust her head through the window of the cab in which Chris had already seated herself and sobbed out, "Oh, my dear, you ain't goin' away without a word of pardon for your pore old Martha, are you? 'Twas my fault maybe, but 'twas never my intention, as well you know. And I done all you told me since, ain't I?"

Then for the first time Chris smiled. "I have nothing to forgive you for, Martha," she said,

taking the old woman's hand, "and I don't think you were at all to blame. Only I had to tell you so because it was necessary to frighten you. Good-bye, Martha ; I won't forget how you helped me."

Possibly Martha, who had just succeeded so magnificently in frightening somebody else, did not quite like being reminded of her own timidity. At any rate, she dried her eyes as the cab disappeared, and summoned up a sort of laugh. "Pore dear!" she murmured. "She and her knife!—as if I ever believed she'd stab me! Waterloo Station she told the cabman, and she's goin' to friends in furrin parts, as I see by her lookin' at them furrin time-tables. They'll ketch her up and bring her back agin in a few days, I s'pose ; but 'twas as well to let her 'ave her own way at startin'. Nothin' like 'aving your own way for coolin' the blood ; and as for Miss Rebecca, if this gives her a turn, 'tis no more than she deserves."

Meanwhile Chris was being conducted to her destination at the utmost speed which an old-fashioned four-wheel cab could accomplish ; that is to say, very slowly indeed. She offered the cabman a double fare if he would drive fast, whereupon he lashed his horse into a lumbering canter ; but that did not imply any great increase

of pace, and it was with only three minutes to spare that the fugitive reached Waterloo.

She took her ticket for Paris, booked her luggage, and was pushed into a carriage just as the train was starting; and then at length she had leisure to reflect upon what she was doing and was about to do. Hitherto there had only been room in her mind for the one idea, that she must at all hazards effect her escape from the wicked and treacherous old woman who had murdered her dog; but now she could not help beginning to wonder whether the Laverignes, upon whose protection she had resolved to throw herself, would be altogether enchanted when a young woman who had run away from her relations dropped upon them from the clouds. It seemed shabby to doubt it, and yet there was room for just a little bit of doubt. "At any rate," thought Chris, "if they don't want me they need not keep me. I am ready to work for my living, or do anything that James Compton may tell me to do, until I come of age, except go back to Aunt Rebecca. That I won't do; and I don't see how he can possibly make me."

It is always a comfort to know one's own mind. Chris, having made hers up quite decidedly, was able to dismiss all anxiety with

regard to such future events as were beyond her control, and could allow herself to cry a little over the bereavement which she had sustained. She was alone in the railway-carriage so that there was no need to conceal her tears, which flowed without restraint while the train sped down the line towards Southampton.

Most people seem to think that there is something ridiculous in mourning over the death of a dog, although they have no reason for thinking so beyond that which is responsible for the rest of their opinions, namely, that they have always been given to understand as much. Poor Peter had been the most sincere, the most devoted, and the most sympathising friend that Chris had ever possessed ; and surely she might be pardoned for regretting him more than she would have regretted any of her relations, who had manifested none of those qualities. But a dead dog, like a dead man, has passed beyond our reach : no tears can touch him nor sorrow bring him back to us : we must go our way as best we can without him ; and the sad thing is that we are able to manage this with much greater ease than we should have supposed. Chris however was hardly old enough to know that ; and perhaps it was a good thing for her that she should have deemed herself inconsol-

able, since she was thus prevented from dwelling overmuch upon the perils and folly of the enterprise to which she was committed. She said to herself that she really didn't care what became of her, which was of course absurd ; yet not more so than many unuttered assertions which the rest of us have made in our time.

What happened to Chris very soon after she had embarked at Southampton was to encounter a heavy easterly swell, which made her deplorably sea-sick, and all the night through rendered her insensible to everything save the dismal misery of the present. The passage nevertheless was a tolerably quick one, and there was a long time to wait at Havre before the express left for Paris, at which city she arrived between four and five o'clock on the following afternoon, hungry, weary, and travel-stained.

Her original intention had been to drive straight to the Lyons Station and proceed to Cannes by the night train ; but she now felt too worn out to stick to this plan, and she thought besides that it would be as well to prepare the Laverignes for her arrival by a telegram. So, instead of continuing her journey, she went to a quiet little hotel in one of the streets leading from the Rue de Rivoli to the Rue St. Honoré where her father, who knew

how to make himself comfortable, had been wont to put up in days gone by ; and there she met with a welcome at once respectful and voluble from the landlord and the landlady.

These good folks, who had not heard of the death of their former patron, expressed themselves as desolated when the sad news was communicated to them, and showed their regret after the customary French fashion, which we, who are less expansive, console ourselves by calling all humbug. Humbugs or not, they were very kind to Chris, and put her into their best rooms and bothered her with no questions until later in the evening, when she had had a nice little dinner and when curiosity naturally began to assert itself. She was going to friends at Cannes, she told the fat landlord, who lifted up his hands in amazement and ejaculated, "Cannes, in the month of September! But mademoiselle will be cooked alive! And what friends can mademoiselle have at Cannes at such a time of the year?"

"They are French friends," Chris explained : "they live there all the year round, and they have not been cooked yet. Besides, I love the sun. And that reminds me that I want to send a telegram to them at once. When does the train leave to-morrow morning?"

The landlord was not sure, but would inquire. At the same time, if he might be permitted to give his opinion, he would say that such a journey as that would be better performed by night than by day, *rapport à la chaleur*. Let mademoiselle repose herself until the following evening: he himself would accompany her to the station and recommend her to the care of the guard: the trains for the south were not crowded at that season, and it would be easy to secure a *coupé-lit*. As for the expense of remaining a few more hours in Paris, he would only say that old customers were not strangers, and he ventured to think that mademoiselle would not complain of the amount of her bill.

After a minute or two of consideration, Chris decided to take this advice. The night journey would not only be less fatiguing, but would land her at Cannes at a more convenient time; and to remain where she was for another twenty-four hours would expose her to no fresh risk, since, even in the very improbable event of her aunt's sending somebody in pursuit of her, it would scarcely occur to the pursuer to seek for her in Paris. Accordingly she despatched her telegram and went to bed, where she was soon sleeping as soundly as if she had

committed no outrage against those social laws which may be said to form the tap-root of civilization. It is true that when she woke on the following morning she was a little overawed at finding herself in a French hotel, and, for the time being, absolute mistress of her own destinies ; but when she had swallowed her coffee (there is still good coffee to be had in Paris, though not at any of the best hotels or restaurants), she began to exult in her freedom and in the thought that, come what might, she could never again be forced to return to the hideous squalor and monotony of a residence at Primrose Hill.

This however was but a transient phase of feeling, due chiefly to the prettiness and cleanliness of her surroundings. As the morning went on her spirits sank again : she remembered how completely alone she was in the world, and her misgivings with regard to the reception likely to be accorded to her by the Laverignes returned with increased force. Dr. Laverigne prided himself upon being unconventional ; but the qualities upon which most of us pride ourselves are precisely those which we do not possess, and the worthy doctor was at all events a Frenchman from the crown of his head to the sole of his foot. Now a

Frenchman must be very unconventional indeed—in fact, he must be sort of outlaw—before he will quarrel with his family; and there was reason to fear that Dr. Lavergne would regard his young friend's escapade in a somewhat serious light. To take the law into your own hands is not at all the same thing as to become independent; and Chris mournfully acknowledged to herself that her future must to a great extent be shaped in accordance with the views of a whimsical old French physician and a dry English lawyer. She had to fall back upon her one consolation—"At any rate, they can't make me go back to Aunt Rebecca, because I won't go."

After she had disposed of her mid-day meal she put on her hat and started for the gardens of the Tuileries, whither she had wandered with Peter a few months—which seemed like years—before. The landlord, who ran out to open the door for her, was visibly shocked at the idea that any young lady could walk through the streets of Paris alone; but he did not permit himself any spoken remonstrance, and for her own part she was too much accustomed to taking care of herself to have any fear of her fellow-mortals.

## CHAPTER. XI.

ON that hot afternoon the Tuileries' gardens were deserted save by a few white-capped nurses and pale-faced children, with whom Chris tried to make friends. They ought to have been in the country or at the seaside ; and so perhaps they thought, for they were peevish and defiant, and she fancied—though that was probably only imagination—that the nurses looked strangely at her. At any rate, they did not seem anxious for her company ; so she strolled on, feeling very weary and lonely, crossed the Place de la Concorde, and, making her way up the gradual ascent of the Champs Elysées, where only an occasional hired carriage filled with tourists was visible, found herself at length at the Arc de Triomphe. It was a longish walk and she was rather tired after it ; but she thought that, as she had come so far, she might as well go a little farther and rest

a while under the shade of the trees in the Bois de Boulogne. Accordingly she plodded on, and as soon as she had passed through the iron gates, struck off into a by-road which seemed to hold out promise of coolness and seclusion. She might have had both the one and the other by remaining quietly indoors; but neither her age nor her temperament permitted her to sit still doing nothing, and consequently, as might have been anticipated, she had by this time made herself very hot.

What was perhaps hardly to be anticipated was that she should encounter an acquaintance in a sequestered alley of the Bois de Boulogne; yet if she had been wise she would have taken that possibility into account, for who can hope nowadays to escape meeting with acquaintances at any place on this side of the equator? Thus it was not really an extraordinary incident, although it was an excessively annoying one, that no sooner had Chris seated herself on the grass beneath a spreading tree than a carriage passed within a stone's throw of her containing three evident Englishmen, in one of whom she recognized with dismay the superb proportions and rubicund countenance of Mr. Ellacombe.

Unluckily he also recognized her, for he made a snatch at his hat, ejaculated "Hullo!"

and "By Jove!" and then, scrambling up dealt the coachman a resounding blow between the shoulders with his stick, as a gentle hint to pull up.

"*Arrêtez*, you fool!" Chris heard him shout; and then (for his voice was a powerful one) she was able to distinguish every word of the explanation which he vouchsafed to his friends. "Drive on, you fellows, I'll be with you by dinner-time. Just caught sight of somebody whom I rather want to speak to." The other two men turned round, looked hard at her and grinned: there was some muttering, apparently of a jocular kind, since it was followed by peals of unrestrained merriment; then the carriage rolled towards Paris, and Mr. Ellacombe, all smiles, advanced across the grass.

If he did not then and there fall down in a fit it was not for want of every kind wish that he might do so on the part of the lady whom he was approaching. Chris had no desire ever to speak to the man again: she was particularly vexed at having met him in such circumstances: she had been infuriated by the laughter of his companions, and she considered that he was taking an unwarrantable liberty in getting out of his carriage to accost her. Worst of all, she had a horrible suspicion that he was not per-

fectly sober. The truth is that he had been lunching a little too well at the Pré Catalan, otherwise he could scarcely have failed to notice the girl's frigid demeanour and lowered brows.

"Well," he exclaimed, "I do call this luck!"

"So do I," thought Chris; "I call it luck of the very worst description." But she said aloud, "How do you do, Mr. Ellacombe? I am sorry you stopped your carriage, but if you will follow this road and take the first turn to the right and then keep straight on you will come to a stand of *fiacres* before long."

"Oh, that'll be all right," answered Ellacombe cheerfully. "I'll walk the whole way back if it comes to that. I'd have walked double the distance to see you. And what are you doing in Paris of all places in the world?"

There could be no doubt about it, the man was not quite himself. He had assumed his worst manner, and how bad that might become Chris knew by unpleasant experience. "Do sit down again," he pleaded, casting himself full length upon the turf from which she had risen: "I want so awfully to have a talk with you."

But Chris did not yield to this seductive invitation. "I must be making my way back to

my hotel," she "I leave for the south of France to-night, and have to pack up."

"For the south of France? What a funny place to be going to! I thought people only went there in winter. But you have heaps of time yet. Don't hurry off, or I shall think I have driven you away."

"I must go," answered Chris firmly. "But," she added, as he scrambled to his feet, "please don't let me take you out into the sun if you would rather remain where you are. I like a hot sun, but most people don't. Indeed, I believe it is rather dangerous for them."

"As if I should allow you to start off all alone!" cried the gallant Ellacombe. "And who are you travelling with?" he asked, as he strode along the road by her side.

"I am not travelling with anybody," answered Chris; "I am going to stay with some friends." And then, by way of changing the subject, she inquired what had brought him to Paris.

He gave vent to a sigh so tremendous that she regretted having put the question, and guessed at once what his reply was going to be. "I had to get through the time somehow," he said; "I couldn't stand home after you went away, so I got some fellows to run over here with me by promising to pay all expenses.

They ain't particularly nice fellows," he added plaintively; "but you couldn't expect nice fellows to come to Paris in September."

"They certainly didn't look very nice," agreed Chris, with a resentful remembrance of their behaviour to her. "Perhaps if they had been nice they wouldn't have liked you to pay their expenses for them."

"Oh, I don't know: that isn't the sort of thing that people object to, as a rule. Anyhow, I shall soon get rid of them, for one might as well be at home as in this stifling hole, and if you're going away I shall hate the place more than I do already! I say, Miss Compton, you'll be back at Brentstow in November, won't you?"

"No," answered Chris, "certainly not. I don't think it is likely that I shall be in England at all in November."

Ellacombe whistled. "Going to stay abroad the whole winter, then?" he asked presently.

"Yes, I hope so. My plans are rather unsettled as yet, but in any case I shall not return to Brentstow."

Ellacombe pondered a while. He had a vague impression that he owed Chris an apology, but he had also an impression, which was not vague, and in support of which he could doubt-

less have added more or less convincing evidence, that it was a very great mistake ever to apologize to a woman. So he dismissed that point from his mind, and gave himself up to other reflections, the eventual outcome of which was that he remarked gravely, "If you're not at Brentstow in the winter, Miss Compton, I sha'n't see you, I'm afraid."

Chris said she was afraid he wouldn't, whereupon he once more became very solemn and pensive. At length he resumed, with some suddenness: "It just comes to this, Miss Compton, that I shall have to ask you now what I meant to have asked you a couple of months hence. I'm a man of few words, and I can't put things prettily, but I can put them plainly. Will you marry me, Miss Compton?—there!"

Chris was not altogether unprepared for this abrupt proposal, nor was she at all dismayed by it. In ordinary circumstances it is probably rather disagreeable to be obliged to refuse any suitor, but when you are above everything eager to get rid of a man, perhaps that is as sure a way as another of accomplishing your object. When once Mr. Ellacombe should have been made to understand that he could not possibly have what he asked for, he would surely see that there was nothing for him to do but to

withdraw at once, and make ~~his~~ way back to Paris by a circuitous route. Unfortunately that was just what Mr. Ellacombe would not understand, although his addresses were rejected in language as unequivocal as was consistent with courtesy. His first impression evidently was that Chris doubted his sincerity, which he accordingly protested with unnecessary warmth: then, as this failed to produce the desired effect he grew puzzled and rather angry.

"I know what it is!" he exclaimed at length, "some of those brutes down in Devonshire, have been telling you things about me. Well, I won't call them liars, though I dare say that is what some of them are. But this I'll promise you, Miss Compton, I'll give up every bad habit I've got into if you'll be my wife. Can I say more?"

Certainly he could add nothing that was of a nature to advance his suit, but, though not tipsy, he had had just enough wine to make him stupid and obstinate: consequently, he said a good deal more when this appeal proved fruitless, and some of the things that he said were not pleasant to listen to.

"I can tell you that there are plenty of girls in Devonshire, and in London too, who would be glad enough to have such a chance," was

one of his judicious remarks. "They've tried for it pretty hard and pretty often, but you are the only one who has ever had it offered to her."

"At any rate, I am innocent of having tried for it," observed Chris drily.

"Well, I don't know about that. Lady Barnstaple didn't seem to think so. At all events, she is prepared to back me up."

"Mr. Ellacombe," said Chris, turning at bay, "you are very impertinent and very foolish! Lady Barnstaple has no authority over me, and very likely I shall never see her again in my life; but even if she were my guardian she couldn't force me to marry a man whom I don't choose to marry."

Ellacombe frowned. "I'm not going to own myself beaten yet," said he doggedly. "Who are your guardians?—for I suppose you have some."

"My cousin, Mr. James Compton, is my guardian, I believe," answered Chris; "but you must know very little about me if you think that I should allow any one to dictate to me in a matter of this kind. Perhaps the best plan is to confess to you that I am at this moment in full flight from my aunt and from my guardian, and that they have not the slightest chance of

persuading me to return to ~~them~~. That ought to convince you that I know my own mind and take my own way."

Apparently however it had not that effect. Mr. Ellacombe was a little startled, but in no way discomfited. "You've plenty of pluck," said he admiringly. "I like a girl who has pluck, and I don't think a bit the worse of you for having bolted. But mind you, Miss Comp-ton, it isn't every man who would say that. Because, you know, it's a deuced awkward thing for a girl to run away from her friends. Remarks are made, and people draw their own conclusions, and altogether it does her no good. I dare say you didn't think about that when you showed them a clean pair of heels. But never mind! you sha'n't suffer for it, I promise you. You come straight back to London with me to morrow, and we'll announce our engagement and be married as soon as you please. Then we can snap our fingers at the gossips."

It was an offensive thing to say, and it was said in an offensive manner; though the speaker may be acquitted of any intention to give offence.

"I don't quite know what you mean, Mr. Ellacombe," answered Chris; "but if anybody is inclined to gossip about me, I suppose I

can snap my fingers alone. I should like to be left alone at once, if you please ; so I will say good-bye now."

She stood still in a determined manner ; but Ellacombe only burst out laughing. "What a little spitfire you are !" he exclaimed. "Well, I like you all the better for it ; only really, you know, you mustn't think that I'm going to be sent off like this, with my tail between my legs. Come and sit down here, and tell me what you want. I sha'n't grudge you anything that I can give, you may be sure."

He laid his hand upon her wrist as he spoke, and with an exertion of force which was perhaps greater than he imagined, drew her towards a bench. Chris was very angry, but also rather alarmed. They were now in the Avenue du Bois de Boulogne, and plenty of people, including a *sergent de ville*, were within hail ; yet she did not quite like to call for assistance, and she was making up her mind to endure Mr. Ellacombe's unwelcome society a little longer when, to her great joy, she caught sight of a tall, slim figure approaching her with which she had good reason to be familiar. "Oh, Val !" she said involuntarily, "how glad I am to see you !"

Mr. Richardson started, took off his hat, and

advanced with outstretched hand, his handsome face, which had looked somewhat sombre the minute before, breaking out into smiles.

While greetings were being interchanged Ellacombe stood twirling his moustache and looking pugnaciously at the new-comer. "Perhaps," he said at length, "you will introduce me to your friend, Miss Compton?"

Chris hurriedly performed the required ceremony, and added in an undertone to Val, "Please make him go away."

Val, who was himself a pugnacious young man, obeyed her with the utmost promptitude. "Mr. Ellacombe," said he, "I am sure you will excuse us if we wish you good-day. Miss Compton and I have not met for some months; and as we are engaged to be married——"

"What!" thundered Ellacombe. And then, turning to Chris, "Is this true, Miss Compton?"

Chris made a sign of assent. It seemed to be the best way of getting rid of him, and it was hardly worth while to explain that the announcement was not quite strictly accurate.

"Then," said Ellacombe, becoming suddenly sober and dignified, "I think you might have told me so a little sooner: Good-bye, Miss Compton, I shall not mention my having seen

you here to anybody. Probably you would rather I didn't."

If any disagreeable insinuation was intended to be conveyed by the last words it was lost upon Chris, who was only too thankful to see Ellacombe's broad back turned towards her. She sank down upon the bench to which she had been led, while Val, seating himself beside her, looked inquiring. Indeed, there were circumstances connected with this meeting which he not unnaturally expected her to account for. However, it was neither of Mr. Ellacombe nor of her own presence in Paris that Chris was first moved to speak about by the sight of this old friend.

"Oh, Val!" she exclaimed, "Peter is dead!"

"Poor little chap!" returned the young man sympathetically. "But that's the worst of Yorkshire terriers, they're always delicate if they're at all well-bred."

"He wasn't delicate: he never had a day's illness in his life," Chris declared; and straightway she narrated how the poor dog had been basely done to death; how she had fled from the roof of the criminal; and how she was now on her way to throw herself upon the protection of the Laverignes.

Mr. Richardson bit his lip and looked rather grave over it. "And pray," he inquired, "who is the red-bearded gentleman who thought you might have told him of your engagement a little sooner?"

"Oh," answered Chris, "he is a very disagreeable person who beats his dogs, and who, I am afraid, is given to drinking. I met him in Devonshire when I was staying with Lady Barnstaple. I didn't dislike him so much at the time, but poor dear Peter did—and bit him. He said that about our engagement because he has just been asking me to marry him, and of course I refused him; and, for some reason or other, he didn't seem to believe that I was in earnest. But you know, Mr. Richardson," she added, bethinking herself that it was about time to avert possible misconceptions, "it isn't really an engagement, and I only let him think so in order to drive him away."

"Well, at any rate you needn't begin to call me 'Mr. Richardson' again," said Val. "Is our carroty friend possessed of money or lands?"

"Yes, I believe he is well off: he has rather a large property close to Brentstow," answered Chris indifferently.

"And yet you refused him? What made you do that, Chris?"

"I don't care enough about money to marry for the sake of it," she replied.

"Come! that's a consolatory and refreshing sentiment to listen to. Especially as I have no money and no prospects. All the same, I wish you could have given another reason, Chris: I wish you could have told me that you haven't quite forgotten me in all this time."

"Of course I haven't forgotten you," returned Chris, colouring a little, for in truth she had seldom thought of him. "But I couldn't say that it was for your sake that I refused Mr. Ellacombe, because that would have been untrue."

"Well," said Val, with a laugh and a shrug of his shoulders, "so long as it wasn't for somebody else's sake. Anyhow, you *have* refused him, and that's some comfort. Do you know, I am on my way to England? And if I hadn't met you to-day I should have turned up at your London address some time before the end of the week and found the bird flown. A nice fright I should have had!"

"My aunt will hear before the end of the week that I am safe at Cannes," replied Chris. "I left without telling her, because I didn't want to see her, and because I wanted to avoid a fuss, but I have no intention of hiding from her."

"I expect you'll have to go back again, you know," remarked Val after a pause.

"But if I won't?"

"I really don't know how far the rights of guardians are protected by extradition treaties, but I should imagine that in any case they might bring pressure to bear upon you by stopping the supplies. Besides, from a social point of view, it is undesirable to defy your guardians. By the way, have they told you yet what your fortune amounts to?"

This query, which was brought out with a somewhat exaggerated assumption of carelessness, might have put a suspicious person upon the alert, but it produced no such effect upon Chris, to whom it had never occurred that Val Richardson could wish to marry her on account of her modest dowry. She replied that she believed she would have a few hundreds a year when she came of age, but did not know how many. Six or seven being suggested as the probable minimum, she answered that she supposed that would be about it, but confessed that she had not paid much attention to the statements laid before her by her cousin. Now, every one will admit that a lover who has next to no means of subsistence of his own is entitled to somewhat fuller information than that, if only

in order that he may resign all claim upon a lady whose income is insufficient to support a husband. Mr. Richardson looked vexed and impatient for a moment, but he displayed neither vexation nor impatience in his rejoinder, which indeed was a very sensible one.

"I really think," said he, "that the best thing you can do is to go back to your aunt without waiting to be coerced. I can quite understand your being angry with her; but it seems to me that you would make a great mistake if you were to cut yourself adrift. You say she is old, and I presume she has money, which you might as well inherit as not. Besides, you may not have to remain with her long. Most likely she would be glad to see you married; so, if you tell her that you are engaged to me—"

"But I am not," interrupted Chris sharply. "You yourself said that I was not."

Val laughed. "That was at Cannes," he began. "After the events of to-day—"

But he stopped short when he saw that Chris, instead of listening to him, was shaking hands with a young man who had rushed across the road to accost her, and who was uttering loud ejaculations of astonishment and joy. It was indeed a day of many meetings, and Chris had good reason to wish that she had curbed her

appetite for fresh air and exercise. Neither of her previous encounters had deprived her of her presence of mind ; but when she found herself face to face with Gerald Severne, whom she had supposed to be shooting grouse in the Highlands, she became, for some reason or other, confused and abashed ; and her embarrassment was so painfully apparent that he became in some measure infected by it.

" You didn't expect to see me here, I suppose, Miss Compton ? " he said almost apologetically. " The fact is I've been done out of my leave. One of our fellows has been called away suddenly, and as there's a lot of work to do they telegraphed for me without compunction. Rather hard lines, I think—at least I thought so until a moment ago. But how do you come to be in Paris at this time of the year ? "

Then for the first time he became aware of Val Richardson, and Chris—somewhat unnecessarily, perhaps—introduced the two men to one another. Gerald's countenance fell perceptibly when he heard the name of the stranger, to whom he raised his hat without offering his hand. A rather disagreeable interval of silence ensued, which Val broke by remarking—" Well, Chris, we ought to be moving on, I suppose : there isn't a great deal of time to spare."

If a man addresses a lady to whom he is in no way related by her Christian name, only one deduction can be drawn as to the footing upon which he stands with regard to her, and Gerald Severne drew it. Great as his distress and disappointment were, they were for the moment held in check by his sense of having committed a *gaucherie*, and his desire to withdraw as speedily as possible from company in which he evidently was not wanted. He said something, he hardly knew what, bowed, and was about to take to his heels when Chris, who partly guessed what was passing in his mind, stopped him.

"Mr. Severne," she stammered, "as I have met you, perhaps I had better say—I mean, I hope you won't think—that is, I am not *staying* in Paris. I am only passing through on my way to the south, and everybody will know all about it soon; only, if you don't mind, I would rather you didn't mention having seen me when you are writing to Lady Barnstaple or Gracie."

Gerald's face grew longer and his eyes grew larger, as indeed was scarcely surprising after such a speech as that. He was quite incapable of making any immediate reply; and Chris went on desperately: "The truth is that I have run away from my aunt's house. I had good

reasons for leaving her, and I shall write to her in a day or two ; but—but, you understand—”

“ I quite understand,” answered Gerald very gravely. “ Of course I shall not think of telling any one that I have seen you.”

And without even saying good-bye, he turned on his heel and was soon out of sight.

## CHAPTER XII.

"WELL," remarked Val Richardson, as Chris and he resumed their walk, "you've done it now, and no mistake!"

"What do you mean?" asked Chris anxiously. "Oughtn't I to have told him that I had run away?"

Val laughed. "It was scarcely prudent, was it? Not that I complain: on the contrary, I am rather disposed to rejoice. Only, you see, there are now two men who have met you here with me, and one of them has been told that we are engaged, while the other is under the impression that we are either married already or about to be married immediately. I don't know whether that is exactly what you would wish."

"Oh!" exclaimed Chris, standing still and clasping her hands: "do you really think that

is Mr. Severne's impression? But why should it be?"

"Because, my dear Chris, you couldn't have told him so much more plainly. He saw you walking with me: he heard from your own lips that you had left your aunt's house, and that everybody would soon know why you had done so: added to which, he was begged not to mention that you were in Paris. What construction would any intelligent human being be likely to put upon such facts and statements as those?"

Chris turned white. "I never meant it," was all that she could say. "I thought it was best to tell him the truth. I was afraid he might write to Lady Barnstaple, and he seemed to think it odd that I should be with you, and I wanted him to understand that I had only met you by chance."

"But unfortunately that was not what you said, and I will venture to assert pretty positively that his belief was what I stated it to be just now."

"At any rate," observed Chris, with a long sigh, "he promised not to tell any one that he had seen us."

"Yes; but I doubt whether you can rely quite implicitly upon his discretion, or upon the

discretion of the red-bearded man either. As a general rule, people think themselves bound to keep a secret so long as it is a secret, and no longer. Your aunt, I should say, will be sure to raise a hue and cry after you : you will be fortunate if the story doesn't get into the newspapers, and you can't expect that Lady Barnstaple will remain in ignorance of it. Well, then, you know, when she discusses your escapade with her neighbour and her son, they will naturally say, 'Since you know all about it there's no harm in our mentioning that we met her in the Champs Elysées with a young man whose intentions appeared to be strictly honourable.' Don't look so angry : I'm only trying to make the position of affairs clear to you ; and after all, there's an easy way of putting chattering tongues to silence. Runaway marriages are a little out of date : still they are not unheard of, and of course they are not disgraceful, and—"

"I will never consent to any such thing!" interrupted Chris indignantly. "If you saw that Mr. Severne was under a false impression, I think you might have said a word to undeceive him ; but you speak as if you wished to take advantage of my having made this dreadful mistake. At all events, you can't say that I

ever promised to marry you, and you may be sure that I shall not let myself be entrapped into a runaway marriage."

"Perhaps you are right," returned Val coolly. "I am not sure that a runaway marriage would be even possible, and I have no wish to get myself into trouble with the Court of Chancery. But an engagement I really do think that you will have to admit; and, as I was saying before your friend joined us, my opinion is that the wisest thing you can do will be to go straight back to your aunt's house. I don't think you can doubt that I love you, Chris, and I don't think you meant what you said when you made that rather cruel speech about my wishing to take advantage of your having got yourself into a mess. I quite admit that I have no right to hold you to your engagement, because I'm so awfully hard up just now; but for your own sake I am sure that it would be better to announce it provisionally, and if you choose to throw me over later I shall not complain."

This had a generous sound; yet Chris could not help feeling some doubts as to the generosity and sincerity of the speaker. She was however ashamed of doubting him, and tried to throw as much friendliness as she could into her reply, which was to the effect that she could not

admit any positive engagement. "If disagreeable things are said about me, I must bear them," she declared. "I would bear anything rather than attempt to live with Aunt Rebecca again."

Val was not a little surprised to find that he could not move the girl from her determination. He argued with her the whole way back to her hotel: he even went near to losing his temper with her; but she stuck resolutely to what she had said. Come what might she would never see her Aunt Rebecca again if she could help it; and he was beginning to own himself beaten, and debate inwardly whether he had better accompany her to Cannes or put himself in communication with her family, when an unexpected and powerful ally came to his aid.

This was no less a person than Mr. James Compton, who, when the pair reached their destination, was discovered under the *porte-cochère* with his hat in his hand, mopping his forehead and apparently expostulating with the landlord in Anglo-French.

"Oh, here she is!" he exclaimed. "Well now, Christina, this is too bad!—it really is too bad! I have told you distinctly and repeatedly that if you had any complaints to make they were to be addressed to me, and that they would meet with such attention as they might

deserve. Instead of which, you must needs conduct yourself after this preposterous fashion! Upon my word, one would suppose that you were utterly ignorant of the laws of your country!"

"One would be right then," replied Chris composedly. "I know nothing whatever about the laws of my country. But I know that I won't go back to Balaclava Terrace."

"Oh, dear me! dear me!" ejaculated Mr. Compton irritably: "that is a nice sort of thing to say to your trustee and your father's executor! Won't indeed! But, my good girl, there is such a word in the dictionary as must, and people who say they won't do things may sometimes be made to do them."

"How," inquired Chris, "are you going to make me return to England?"

If it came to that, Mr. Compton was not quite sure. He changed his tone and replied, "When I tell you that Miss Ramsden is seriously, indeed I may say dangerously, ill, and that her illness is chiefly due to your thoughtless behaviour, I trust that even you will see the propriety of starting for London with me by to-night's mail. Perhaps, in the circumstances, I ought hardly to be expected to reason with you, but I am prepared to do so—

I am prepared to do so. Be so kind as to step into this room for a few minutes."

And he led the way towards the *bureau*, which the landlord, who had been listening to the foregoing dialogue with much interest, indicated by a wave of the hand. Then, and not until then, he noticed Val, who indeed was following Chris with an air of authority and protection. "And pray, who is this?" he inquired.

The person alluded to answered the question suavely. "My name is Richardson," said he. "I have been acquainted with Miss Compton for some time past, and I may as well mention at once that I am engaged to be married to her."

Then it was pretty to see how the lawyer bristled up and frowned. "Oh, nonsense!" he returned. "Pooh, pooh! don't talk to me like that, sir, if you please. You are probably aware that Miss Compton is not of age and cannot engage herself to anybody without the consent of her guardian." For this Richardson was, at any rate, a man, not an unreasoning and incomprehensible girl, and could be treated accordingly.

But Val did not seem to be at all frightened. "Of course," he answered politely, "I am quite

aware of that, but I don't despair of obtaining her guardian's consent. Perhaps, when you have done speaking to her, you will spare me five minutes. I'll wait here for you." Whereupon he took out a cigarette and lighted it.

Mr. Compton grunted, but did not refuse the interview solicited. The young man might, for anything that he knew to the contrary, be an eligible young man, or again he might be in a position to give trouble. Either way, it would be as well to hear what he had to say for himself. So Val was left to the society of the landlord, while Mr. Compton retired into the *bureau* with Chris, who asked: "How did you discover that I was here?"

"Oh, that was not a matter of much difficulty. When I was sent for to your aunt's house yesterday morning I learnt from the servant that you had started for the Continent, and that you had told your cabman to drive to Waterloo. I crossed by Dover and Calais last night, and on arriving here went straight to the Lyons Station, thinking that in all probability you intended casting yourself upon the protection of Dr. Lavergne at Cannes. But as you had not been seen there, and as I could not, in any case, have left for the south before to-night, it seemed to me best to make inquiries at the St. Lazare

terminus, where I at once obtained the information that I desired. You had been noticed there on your arrival, and the address to which you had been taken was procured for me after a short delay. The French are a people whom I dislike and distrust," concluded Mr. Compton, who had perhaps spoken to half-a-dozen Frenchmen in his life, "but I am bound to admit that in some respects they are more businesslike than we are."

"And so Aunt Rebecca sent for you. Is it true that she is dangerously ill?" inquired Chris, after a pause.

"I am not in the habit of saying what is untrue, Christina. Your aunt has had a slight stroke of paralysis; and although I do not wish to be guilty of any exaggeration, and the doctor told me that he did not apprehend immediate danger, it is evident that, at her time of life and in her weak state of health, such an illness might at any moment terminate fatally. I may add that she herself ascribes it to anxiety about you, and that she entreated me most earnestly to bring you back to her. I was to say that she sincerely regrets having ordered your dog to be destroyed, but she assured me—and I confess that I see no reason to doubt her word—that she fully believed the animal to be mad."

"He was not mad, and she knew that he was not," returned Chris, who had been wavering, but whose wrath was rekindled by this statement.

"Very well, Christina: I will not attempt to argue the point with you. I think however you will agree with me that when your aunt, who may be dying, expresses the strongest desire to have you with her, and when she declares her intention of making every reparation in her power for the wrong of which you complain, you cannot refuse to give way to her."

Chris sighed, and bowed her head in sign of assent. Certain injuries are irreparable, but none are—or at all events none ought to be—absolutely unpardonable. It did not seem likely that Miss Ramsden would die; but if she said she was sorry, and if she thought she was going to die, there was obviously nothing for it but to capitulate.

"And now," continued Mr. Compton, taking much inward credit to himself for having carried his point at so small an expenditure of breath, "perhaps you will be so good as to tell me who Mr. Richardson is, what he means by his impudent assertion that you are engaged to be married to him, and whether it was in order to meet him that you left England?"

Mr. Compton, albeit a solicitor, may have had some knowledge of the methods employed by the other branch of the legal profession, and understood how to get at the truth by cross-examination. Ten minutes had not elapsed before he had extorted from Chris not only all that she knew about Val Richardson, but also the unlucky fact that she had encountered both Mr. Ellacombe and Mr. Severne in the course of the day. He shook his head and said it was an awkward business—very awkward indeed. Like Val, he had little confidence in the ability or the inclination of those two young men to keep a secret. “And whatever else may be doubtful,” he concluded, “one thing is as plain as can be, namely, that you are in this Mr. Richardson’s power. I don’t know whether you have realized that?”

“How in his power? What can he do to me?” asked Chris.

“What can he do to you? Really Christina!—but I suppose *all* young women are perfect idiots! Don’t you understand that what he can do is just this? He can say that you ran away to meet him at Paris, and that I pursued you and caught you up just in time to save you from flying to Jericho or some such place with him. And he can bring pretty

strong evidence in support of his assertion too."

"I don't think he would behave in such a way," Chris said.

"I sincerely hope not; but from what you tell me of him I should imagine that it was well within the bounds of possibility. In fact, I may as well tell you plainly that, though he appears to be a thoroughly undesirable and unsuitable husband for you, I believe that the only thing I can do in the circumstances is to sanction an engagement—a conditional engagement—between you."

"I don't wish to be engaged to him," said Chris slowly.

"I am sorry to hear it, because I can see no alternative course open to you. Engagements do not invariably and necessarily entail marriages, and no doubt it will be in my power to insist upon a long delay. But perhaps I had better speak to the young man himself. Now, Christina, if you will go up stairs and pack your clothes, you will find me ready for you when it is time to start."

Mr. Compton, after the manner of victors, had assumed a somewhat more peremptory tone from the moment that he had achieved his victory; but Chris was too dispirited to quarrel

with him on that account, and went off to her room without a word. She was obliged to admit to herself that the man was right. She had done a very foolish thing, and ill luck, combined with her own folly, had placed her in a position so compromising that Val, if he was inclined to profit by it, might hold her at his mercy. And she could not feel quite as sure as she would have liked to feel that he was above taking that ignoble advantage. Mr. Compton, as one acquainted with the seamy side of human nature, had very little doubt upon the point. He stepped out into the court-yard, where Val was smoking his cigarette, motioned to that young gentleman to seat himself upon a bench, and said—

“Now, Mr. Richardson, I am at your service. You state that you are engaged to my cousin. What is your income? What are your prospects? And to what members of your family can you refer me for those particulars which I should naturally wish to receive about a total stranger who makes such a statement to me?”

Val, with a slight smile, deplored the circumstance that he was an orphan. Furthermore, he admitted frankly that he had no near relatives, that he had no prospects worth mentioning, and that his income was precarious. Still

he was not without hope that something would turn up. He understood that Miss Compton was tolerably well provided for, and although he admitted that he was not entitled to press for an immediate marriage, he could not see his way to resigning all claim upon her. "Taking everything into consideration," said he, "it would really be best for her own sake to let people know of our engagement."

"Exactly so," agreed Mr. Compton drily: "I thought we should hear that argument before long. Well, Mr. Richardson, as I was saying to my cousin just now, we have practically no option but to accept your terms. I should however recommend you to be satisfied with what we are prepared to concede. Let it be understood that if, at the expiration of an interval of time which we need not at present fix precisely—say eighteen months hence—you are able to show that you have reasonable means and prospects, and if your conduct during that interval has been steady and respectable, the marriage shall take place: if otherwise, it shall be abandoned. I am proceeding of course upon the assumption that my cousin's escapade will become known and that her friends will think she contemplated a run-away marriage which was prevented by me.

Disagreeable, but endurable. If, contrary to my expectation, the secret should be kept, you would be able, in the event of our dismissing you, to hold a sort of threat of exposure over our heads: only you must bear in mind that our course would then be plain and easy. We should simply tell the truth, and we should be believed. Everybody would be aware that you had been engaged to my cousin for a considerable length of time, and our reasons for breaking off the engagement would be at everybody's service. I don't know whether I make myself clear?"

"Perfectly clear, thank you," answered Val laughing. "You don't seem to entertain a very flattering opinion of me, Mr. Compton?"

"I know next to nothing about you," returned the lawyer shortly. "If you care about my good opinion, I dare say you can earn it."

"It shall be my endeavour to do so," Val declared with due gravity. "I am going to London immediately, and I suppose I may take it that I shall be permitted to call upon Miss Compton as often as I please?"

"Oh, certainly. That is, as often as she may please. I think you heard me mention that her aunt, Miss Ramsden, is seriously ill; so that she is likely to be a good deal occupied."

Val promised that he would neither demand nor expect more than Miss Compton was inclined to give him, which sounded magnanimous and drew a few words of commendation from the lawyer. Mr. Compton had no intention in the world of allowing his cousin to throw herself away upon a penniless adventurer ; but that an engagement must be submitted to he saw plainly enough, and he thought that she might be trusted to reduce the privilégés of her betrothed to a minimum.

Shortly afterwards Chris came down stairs and, having despatched a second explanatory telegram to the Laverignes, declared herself ready to set out.

"I shall see you again very soon," Val whispered, as he helped her into the carriage ; but to this encouraging announcement she made no reply.

## CHAPTER XIII.

It is always an undignified thing to run away ; but to run away unsuccessfully, to be caught by the ear and dragged back again, is enough to break the toughest heart. When Chris was deposited by her cousin on the threshold of that dismal little house in Balaclava Terrace which she had inwardly vowed never to cross again, she had no heart left in her, and could not at all respond to the tumultuous welcome of Martha, who said :

“ The Lord be praised ! ” and added, “ I ain’t closed an eye since you left, miss. Says I to myself, ‘ You hungrateful creetur,’ I says, ‘ you bin and brought your pore old missus to death’s door, and if any ’arm comes to Miss Christina, the blame,’ I says, ‘ must be yours.’ But you’ve come ’ome safe and sound, my dear, and I’m free to admit that ’tis better luck than I deserve.”

"I suppose I must go and see Aunt Rebecca," said Chris wearily. "Is she still in bed?"

"Bless your soul, yes!—and will be till she's carried out of it in her coffin, I shouldn't wonder. Now you won't speak 'ard to her, will you, my dear? She's took on terrible about it all, and if she done wrong—well, 'tis no more than we all do most days of the week."

"Of course I shall not reproach her," answered Chris; "it wouldn't have been worth while coming back if I had intended to do that."

And indeed when she saw Miss Ramsden her resentment died away. The poor old woman, who was lying in bed, propped up by pillows, looked up at her niece in a frightened, deprecating way, and then began to cry feebly.

"I didn't think that you would mind so much," she sobbed; "I don't care for dogs as you do, and he really did bite me. But I know I'm bad-tempered and vindictive; your poor mother always used to say so, and this isn't the first time I've had to acknowledge it."

There was no holding out against that. Chris said, "Don't trouble yourself any more about it, Aunt Rebecca; we'll never mention the subject again." And then she made her own apology, which perhaps might have been worded in much

the same way. She certainly had not thought that her aunt would mind losing her so much.

So there were tears and embracings and peace was re-established. Miss Ramsden, it is true, was more anxious to be forgiven than ready to forgive, and when once she had been assured that her offence was condoned, recurred with rather ungenerous frequency to that of her niece ; but it was evident that she was not altogether responsible for her utterances.

"How you could treat me so I can't think," she whimpered. "I'm sure I've always tried to make you happy and given you every luxury. And then to leave me with that wretched woman Martha, who is only waiting till the breath is out of my body to steal everything in the house that she can lay hands on!"

Chris very soon perceived that the old woman was not herself, and managed to bear this complaint, which was repeated over and over again, with tolerable equanimity. What was more distressing, and apparently quite unconquerable, was the suspicious aversion which Miss Ramsden had conceived for her faithful servant.

"Don't speak to me about her!" she would say when Chris tried to take Martha's part. "She has deceived me once, and she will deceive me again if she gets the chance. She told me

you were in bed and asleep when she had just helped you to escape from my house—a woman who owes everything to me and will inherit money when I die, as she well knows! I only wonder that she hasn't poisoned me before this!"

The patience with which Martha endured these injurious accusations, which were brought against her quite as often in her presence as in her absence, made Chris feel additionally ashamed of her own share in the deception complained of. "Bless you! she don't mean the 'arf of what she says," Martha would declare. "And indeed it's true enough that I've deceived her times and again. There's people, my dear, as you couldn't live with without you was to deceive 'em, and Miss Rebecca she's allus bin one of that sort."

After a day or two it became clear that Miss Ramsden's life was in no immediate danger. The doctor however said that her mental condition was unlikely to improve, and she manifested no desire to leave her bed. There she lay, hour after hour and day after day, doing nothing, and possessed, as it seemed, by only two or three persistent ideas. One of these was that Martha was a dangerous traitress; another was that it was unsafe to allow her

niece out of her sight ; and there was yet another, with which Chris was made acquainted before long. For the time being, what she had to make up her mind to was to remain in the stifling atmosphere of a darkened bedroom from morning to night. In vain she pledged her word that she would not again attempt to escape from her aunt's house.

"Why do you say that?" Miss Ramsden would rejoin. "Nobody is accusing you of wanting to run away. Only I do think you might have a little more consideration for me. Some day perhaps, when you are old and helpless, you will find out what it is to be left all by yourself for two or three hours at a time."

By way of set-off against the misery of this imprisonment, Chris was provided with a capital excuse for shortening her interviews with Val Richardson, who made his appearance in Balclava Terrace a few days after her return thither, and whose visits were a great deal more frequent than she liked. In fear and trembling, and after a good deal of hesitation, she had made known her engagement to her aunt, and the apathy with which the announcement was received had surprised her not a little.

"I am not long for this world," Miss Ramsden said lugubriously. "When I am gone you will

marry, and your husband will spend the little money that I shall be able to leave to you. That is a matter of course; it is what they always do." She did not seem to take the least interest in Mr. Richardson, and declined to see him. "They are all the same," she said.

Parsimony is probably like other passions which have degenerated into vices in being its own reward and destitute of ultimate object. Those who have allowed themselves to be conquered by it appear at times to deplore their slavery, just as a drunkard will deplore his, and to recognize that death will set them free. Miss Ramsden often mentioned that Chris would inherit what she had to bequeath, but never laid any restrictions upon her legatee, nor expressed a wish with regard to the disposition of the fortune which had been her fetish during so many years.

Val, on the other hand, was much interested in this subject, and was not so successful in disguising his interest as he may perhaps have imagined himself to be. That Miss Ramsden was rich and that she was dying he had discovered; but he had not been able to find out how rich she was, nor had Chris thought it necessary to acquaint him with the provisions of her aunt's will. It was not so much because

she believed him to be mercenary as because she feared to disappoint him that this discreet policy commended itself to her. He made no secret of the fact that he was hard pressed for money, and she thought it would be a pity to buoy him up with hopes which might at any moment be dispelled by the caprice of an old woman. Besides, she was very far from having determined to marry Val. Had she been sure that she would one day become his wife, she would perhaps have been less lenient with him and less sorry for him. Certain it is that the confessions which he made to her were not such as most girls would like to hear from the man to whom they proposed to intrust their persons and their property.

"I'll tell you what it is, Chris," he said to her dejectedly one day ; "a little more of this and I shall be dead broke. Backed the wrong one again ! I don't know how it is that I invariably back the wrong one. A forty to one chance too !"

"Well, but," observed Chris, to whom this confidence did not come as the first of its kind, "if forty to one is laid against a horse, doesn't that mean that he is very unlikely indeed to win his race ?"

"Not necessarily. Certain horses, don't you

see, are reserved for certain races, and nothing is known of their true form ; and I had a really first-rate tip about this one. In point of fact, he actually did secure a place—for which I hadn't backed him. Well, bang goes five hundred pounds, that's all ! And how I'm going to pay is more than I know."

Women are seldom hard upon men of so-called sporting proclivities. That betting has nothing in the world to do with sport is a proposition which most of them would probably be inclined to dispute, and although Chris thought Val foolish and scolded him for his folly, it never occurred to her to regard him as simply a dishonest gambler. Yet a man who risks more than he can pay is undoubtedly as dishonest as the ragged ruffian who picks your pocket and who is very properly sent to prison for doing so. Moreover, she was glad to lecture him and offer him sound advice. It placed her upon a sort of sisterly footing with him and rendered any lapses into a loverlike demeanour on his part difficult, if not impossible. Sometimes she did not see him for four or five consecutive days. He attended all the race-meetings, and, by his own account, stayed with aristocratic friends ; he did not always lose his money nor was he always despondent. But he

was always very anxious to hear whether Miss Ramsden was better or worse.

Miss Ramsden was neither the one nor the other. She refused to get out of bed ; but she had a pretty good appetite, and the doctor, to whose visits she objected strongly on the score of expense, went away for his autumn holiday, as he told Chris, "without any anxiety." So the uneventful days succeeded one another, and the last of the summer was swept away with south-westerly gales and rains, and Chris, who had nothing to look forward to, became after a fashion reconciled to the dreary present. Once Mr. Compton called and asked to see her. He wished to know whether she had heard anything from Lady Barnstaple, and, on being informed that she had not, said he was very glad of that.

"It looks," said he, "as if those two men whom you met in Paris had really kept their own counsel. Of course that isn't to say that they will continue to do so. I am not much in the way of hearing about people in that station of life ; but about Mr. Richardson and his habits I have by chance heard a few particulars. It appears that he is the only son of a deceased Liverpool merchant, who left him a very fair patrimony—which he has dissipated. Just now,

he is, as I understand, a good deal mixed up with a set of fast young lordlings whose extravagances his means do not enable him to imitate with any safety. In short, there is every reason to anticipate that he will either pass through the Bankruptcy Court or disappear very shortly."

Chris said she was sorry to hear it.

"Your sorrow, if sincere, is inexplicable to me, Christina. You certainly told me that you did not wish to marry this man, and if you do not wish to marry him you ought to be glad that there is a strong probability of his being removed from your path."

"He has always been very kind to me," said Chris; "I don't want him to be ruined."

Mr. Compton shook his head. "The young man is going to the dogs," he replied. "Of course, if you are determined to go there with him, it will eventually be in your power to do so. You will not however have such power until you attain your majority, and I may remind you that you will not attain your majority for nearly four years to come. In the meantime, I do trust that your common sense will deter you from giving Mr. Richardson any further hold over you than he already, most unfortunately, possesses."

The caution was less necessary than Mr. Compton supposed. Chris was fully alive to the fact that Val had a hold over her, and it had more than once occurred to her that if she could only stave off her marriage until she came of age, she might possibly purchase her freedom by a pecuniary sacrifice. That such an idea should have entered her mind was as strong a proof as any one could have desired that she was not and never would be in love with the man to whom she was engaged. But that did not prevent her from pitying and sympathizing with him, and she was perhaps all the more disposed to condone the offence of prodigality because its opposite was so often and so disagreeably brought under her notice.

Miss Ramsden confided to her one day that there was a very large sum of money in the house. "Small as my income is," the old woman said, "I have saved something out of it for many years past, and all my savings are contained in the strong-box which, as I dare say you may have noticed, stands under the sideboard in the dining-room. Has Martha said anything to you about it?"

"No," answered Chris; "I don't suppose she knows anything about it."

"She knows more than you think," returned

Miss Ramsden, with a cunning side-glance ; “she is a deceitful, dangerous woman, and I should not like her to find out what that strong-box is worth. Ah, dear me ! when I think how easily this house might be broken into ! Sometimes I lie awake trembling more than half the night through.”

Chris had learnt by this time that it was useless to take up the cudgels on Martha’s behalf. She only said, “Why don’t you send your money to the bank, Aunt Rebecca ?”

“What, and let those unscrupulous bankers gamble with it ? No, indeed ! Sometimes I have thought of the funds ; but I read my newspaper carefully, and I know that any day a powerful coalition might be formed against England. And then where would consols be ? No, no ; my money is my own, and I’ll keep it by me as long as I live. But that won’t be long,” she added, with a sigh. And then—“Chris, dear, when I am gone, and when all that I have saved becomes yours to do what you like with, you won’t throw it away, will you ? You’ll remember your poor old aunt, and how she denied herself for your sake, and how she had no secrets from you, and how, even on her death-bed, when she was helpless, she wasn’t afraid to tell you that she had ten thousand

pounds in the house. At least, I won't say that it is quite as much as that ; but it is more than five thousand pounds, at any rate. You'll remember how I trusted you, won't you, dear ?" And Miss Ramsden shed a few tears of self-pity.

To appeals of this kind Chris made such reassuring replies as she could. This old woman, who, with one foot in the grave, complained bitterly of the quantity of meat that was bought to provide her with beef-tea, was a sufficiently pitiable spectacle ; but it was not easy to feel as much compassion for her as for a young man who was ruining himself upon the turf. Moreover, her constant terror of burglars and distrust of every one about her ended by irritating her niece's nerves a little. Of Martha Chris felt as sure as she did of herself ; but there was no denying that the house might be broken into any night, and what could three defenceless women, of whom one was bed-ridden, do in such an event ? After Chris had been told about the treasure in the strong-box, she, too, took to lying awake at night and starting at any sudden noise.

One afternoon she said to Val, " I often wonder what I should do if I were to hear robbers moving about down stairs after I had

gone to bed. What would you do in my place?"

"Cover up my head and pray that they might take all they could get and go away without murdering me," he answered, laughing. "Not that they would be likely to secure a very handsome spoil on these premises. Has the old lady got any plate?"

"It is all electro-plate, I believe," answered Chris; but her eye wandered involuntarily towards the strong-box under the sideboard; for this interview, like the rest of her interviews with Val, took place in the dining-room, the drawing-room having been closed during Miss Ramsden's illness in order to preserve the furniture from needless wear and tear.

Val followed the direction of her gaze, rose and lifted the box. "By Jove! it's heavy;" said he. "I wish it was full of sovereigns, and I wish I had half of them! I'll tell you what, Chris: I'll undertake to come here every night and protect your aunt's property with a revolver in my hand if she'll engage, on her side, to leave me the quarter of it in her will. I shouldn't be in the least surprised if she had stored away a good deal of money in that box."

"Perhaps she has," answered Chris laugh-

ing; "but I'm afraid she wouldn't leave any of it to you even if you did take upon yourself to mount guard over it."

"Well, she can leave it to you if she likes; that would be much the same thing, wouldn't it? Will she bequeath her fortune to you, do you suppose?"

There was perhaps just a shade too much of eagerness in his tone. "Really I don't know," answered Chris rather coldly, "and really I don't care. Do you?"

"Why, of course I do," returned Val, who could not quite conceal the irritation which was naturally provoked by such a silly speech. "It would be ridiculous to pretend that I am absolutely indifferent to money. Nobody is; although some people may fancy that it sounds well to pretend they are."

"I assure you it is quite the same thing to me whether what I say sounds well to you or not," Chris declared. "I don't want Aunt Rebecca's money; and even if I get it, it won't follow as a matter of course that it will come into your possession. You seem to forget that."

"Am I engaged to you, Chris, or am I not? You will admit that I am at least entitled to know what my position is?"

"When you first asked me to marry you," answered Chris, "you said that the engagement was to be binding upon you but not upon me."

"I believe I did say something of the sort; but certain events have taken place since that time you know."

"Then," cried Chris, with flashing eyes, "my cousin James was right, and you are really base enough to threaten me! Well, I am glad that we understand one another. You may say exactly what you please, Mr. Richardson; you may tell everybody the truth about our meeting in Paris, or you may tell what is not the truth, but what most people, I dare say, will believe. Only you won't be able to tell anybody that we are engaged to be married after this."

There was a long pause, followed, as was to be expected, by a surrender on Val's part. He said: "You are rather unkind and rather unjust, I think. I neither threatened you nor thought of threatening you; but I certainly understood your cousin to consent to an engagement between us which should be as binding upon both sides as engagements ever are. Of course you are at liberty to throw me over if you please, and whether you do so or not I shall hold my tongue. No one will ever hear from me of your having been in Paris. You know

very well that I told you I loved you, and asked you to marry me before I had heard a word about your aunt and her money. I am not going to say that I care nothing for her money, because that would be both untrue and absurd." .

Chris was appeased and a little ashamed. "I am sorry I spoke as I did, Val," said she with a sigh; "but I can't help wishing sometimes that we were not engaged. If only you were my brother or my cousin I shouldn't a bit mind you're wanting me to be rich, and I should ask nothing better than to give you the half of my money when I get it; but as it is, I don't like to think of your counting upon me, because I don't feel as if I could ever marry you."

"I must take my chance," answered the young man. "If you decide against me when the time comes I shall not complain, you may be sure. Although I might perhaps think that if you intended to refuse me all along it would have been simpler and more considerate to do it at first."

Chris felt the full force of this appeal to her generosity. There would, no doubt, be something rather shabby about ultimately rejecting a man whom she had only accepted because a cautious lawyer had warned her that things

might be made very uncomfortable for her if she didn't; and his promise to abstain from using the power which he possessed was of course an additional claim upon her.

"I will if I can," she said at length; "but if I can't you must try to forgive me, Val. After all, you wouldn't wish to have a wife who didn't love you?"

It is probable that Mr. Richardson could have found it in his heart to put up with that disadvantage, provided that certain compensations were offered to him; but he only answered, "I don't want to worry you, Chris. As I say, I'll take my chance and bide my time. Always supposing, that is, that I don't have to bolt out of the country before the time comes. Unless the luck turns I shall pretty soon reach the end of my tether."

"Why do you go on betting, Val?" asked Chris sorrowfully.

"Because I can't help it, my dear. There are countries, as you may have heard, which have negotiated enormous loans, and which keep on starting others in order to pay the interest upon the earlier ones. It's easy enough to demonstrate that such a policy is suicidal; but the answer is that repudiation would be more suicidal still. Sooner or later

I've got to settle like other people, and the only way in which I can find the money is to back winners. So I must go on trying to spot winners."

"I wish I could help you!" sighed Chris meditatively. "Do you want a great deal of money, Val?"

"It depends upon what you call a great deal. A couple of hundred would be useful; five hundred would be more useful still; a thousand would about set me on my legs."

Chris made a gesture of despair. "Ah! then it's no use thinking about it!" she exclaimed. "Haven't you tried to get any employment?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, I've made inquiries, but lucrative engagements are not to be had for the asking. I dare say I shall pull through; and if I don't pull through—well, it won't much matter to anybody except myself, will it?"

There was just enough of truth in this last observation to make Chris wish with all her heart that she could care for that handsome young reprobate a little more than she did.

## CHAPTER XIV.

To sit and weep over the grave of a dog may seem a very silly thing to do ; but perhaps it is not very much more silly than weeping over the grave of a human being. In the one case, as in the other, we know perfectly well that what we have loved has left this world absolutely and finally, and has no longer the remotest connection with the discarded chrysalis, which is slowly turning to dust beneath our feet ; yet few of us can divest ourselves of the impression that something of a dead man's personality clings about his tomb ; and this should be all the more so in the case of a dog, who, as we are confidently assured, has no personality at all, save such as ceases with his breath.

Naturally or unnaturally, Chris let fall a great many tears upon the mound which marked poor Peter's last resting-place. She had been

accustomed to confide everything to him during his lifetime, and now that that silent, faithful, and sympathizing confidant had been taken away from her, she sometimes took her troubles out into the grimy little back-garden where he lay, and thought over them there. Of these she had more than a sufficiency, the worst of them, perhaps, being those which she did not think about after any distinct fashion and scarcely even realized. She was sorry, to be sure, that Gerald Severne should have parted from her under such a complete misapprehension of the cause of her unlucky flight to Paris ; but when she found her mind dwelling upon Gerald, she instinctively turned to some other subject of reflection. For a good many days in succession she neither saw nor heard of Val, who, as she rightly conjectured, was at New-market, sedulously endeavouring to recoup himself for past losses ; and this would have been a relief to her if she had not felt so desperately lonely.

"You are moping, Christina ; and why you should mope I really cannot tell. It is rather ungrateful of you, I think," Miss Ramsden would sometimes say to her, with a return of her old peevishness.

But as a general rule Miss Ramsden was too

deeply engrossed with her own anxieties to pay much heed to her niece's dispirited mien. Her fear of being robbed seemed to be fast assuming the proportions of a monomania ; she was for ever alluding to the strong-box in the dining-room, which Chris in vain urged her to have removed to some place of safety, and these allusions were as often as not made while Martha was in the room.

"Since you distrust poor old Martha so much," Chris could not help observing one day, "I wonder that you are not more careful of what you say before her."

"My dear," returned Miss Ramsden, "if that woman intends letting thieves into the house, it is better that she should know where my valuables are than that she should bring her confederates into our bedrooms to cut our throats. Even as it is, I can't rest for thinking of what may happen, though she surely must be aware that there is nothing worth stealing in this room. Yesterday afternoon, when you had left me all alone, I thought I would try to read the newspaper, and the first thing I saw was a dreadful leading article about the 'burglary season' being at hand."

Chris also had read the leading article in question, and it had made her a little uncom-

fortable. It referred principally to the unpleasant habit adopted by the modern burglar of arming himself with a revolver, and the conclusion arrived at by the writer was that modern householders could not do better than follow his example. Chris had no revolver; but she took to sleeping with her Spanish knife under her pillow, and she likewise took to waking up with a start three or four times in the course of the night. Her aunt had so harped upon the probability of the house being broken into that she felt as if the occurrence of that catastrophe was a mere question of time.

As for Martha, she frankly confessed that she double-locked her door when she retired for the night. "And I wouldn't stir if I 'eard any one movin' about below, my dear—no, not for anythink you could offer me. Let 'em take all they can get; it won't be much, you may depend. Don't you believe a word about Miss Rebecca's box as she says is full of money. She's a deal too cunning to run such risks as that."

Cunning is not incompatible with folly, and poor old Miss Ramsden was in such a feeble condition of mind and body that there was nothing very surprising in her having divulged what she apparently desired to keep secret to

the very person of whom she professed to be most afraid. It was by no means certain that she had not divulged it also to others ; for when the tradespeople sent round for orders, she had a way of summoning the men up to her bedroom, protesting against their excessive charges and explaining to them garrulously how poverty-stricken she was.

One night Chris was awakened by a tremulous tapping against the wall which separated her bedroom from that in which her aunt slept. She jumped up at once, slipped on her dressing-gown, and presently found Miss Ramsden sitting up in bed, pale and trembling.

"It has come at last," the old woman whispered ; "I knew it would ! There's a man in the dining-room."

"Are you sure ?" asked Chris.

"Perfectly certain. I distinctly heard a window opened, and then a footstep in the hall."

Chris stood for a moment listening intently. "I can't hear a sound," she said.

"Of course you can't ; and that is what shows that he must be in the dining-room. We should hear him if he were in the drawing-room, which is just underneath this. But no doubt he has been told where to go."

"Well," said Chris quietly, "if there really

is anybody there, we mustn't let him get off." And she moved towards the door.

"Stop, stop!" exclaimed Miss Ramsden, in an agitated whisper. "What are you thinking of, child! Do you suppose that you can do anything against a great strong burglar?"

"I can identify him, at all events," answered Chris; and despite her aunt's tears and remonstrances, she left the room and stole softly down stairs, her knife ready in her hand.

She had been nervous enough before the danger presented itself; but now that it had come, she had no notion of showing the white feather. On her way towards the dining-room she remembered certain scraps of information which had been imparted to her by her friend José touching the use of the knife. According to that authority, if you want to kill a man, by far your best plan is to face him and strike for his heart; but when your desire is merely to pay him out for some not unpardonable offence, to give him a fright and leave him with a salutary impression that you are not the sort of person whom it is safe to offend, you should approach him stealthily from behind, and stab him close to the shoulder. By this means—provided that the blow be delivered with sufficient force—you make him believe for a moment

that he is a dead man, you probably draw a good deal of blood, and you do him no harm at all, unless perchance he should be a sickly or intemperate creature; in which case you are, of course, not responsible for any unpleasant consequences that may ensue.

Bearing these instructions in mind, Chris approached the dining-room door on tiptoe, and pausing for an instant, with her ear close to the key-hole, was made aware that she had been aroused by no false alarm. Somebody was undoubtedly in the room, and was moreover making use of a file with very little apparent regard to the noise produced by his operations. For one moment Chris hesitated. She had heard that burglars seldom go to work single-handed; and it was evident that if there were two men there, she would not only be overmatched, but would have no opportunity given her of using her weapon. However, she determined to chance that. She turned the handle noiselessly, and pushed against the door, which did not yield. It was locked on the inside. This check, which might have been anticipated, did not discourage her for any longer time than it took her to reflect that there was no possible way of escape through the dining-room window, which overlooked a broad and deep area, pro-

tected by spiked railings, and that the robber must needs effect his exit, as he had made his entrance, through the hall-window, which, as she could see, was wide open. She returned to the door, knelt down beside it, and listened.

She could tell as well as if she had been in the room what the thief was about. He was trying to force open the strong-box, and he had found himself obliged to file through the heavy iron clamps which secured it. It was a long business, and he did not seem to be making satisfactory progress with it; for Chris could distinctly hear him muttering and cursing under his breath. What reassured her was that no responsive murmurs were audible, so that it might safely be concluded that he had undertaken the job without help. That being so, she did not feel much afraid of him. She was prepared to spring upon him the moment that he came out, and as he would be taken by surprise, there was a very fair chance that he might be forced to relinquish his booty.

At the expiration of a quarter of an hour, during which time not a sound was heard in any other part of the house, he appeared to make up his mind that he could not force the box open and must carry it away with him. It was plain, from his scuffling movements and laboured

breath, that he was lifting some heavy weight ; then his footsteps slowly drew near the door ; then the lock was turned ; and then he emerged—a tall, slight man, stooping under the load which he bore upon his shoulder.

Chris, who had retired a few paces, had him practically at her mercy, and if she failed to take as complete advantage of her opportunity as she might have done, that was perhaps because, when it comes to stabbing anybody—even a thief—in the back, hereditary instinct is apt to enter a protest. Be that as it may, the wound which she inflicted upon him was a mere scratch. Her knife just glanced over his right shoulder, ripping up his coat and scarcely more than grazing his skin ; but the effect of the onslaught was all that could have been wished. He uttered a sharp cry, dropped the box, which fell to the ground with a resounding crash, and made a dash for the window.

But Chris was too quick for him. “You won’t get off so easily as that,” she cried, as she sprung in front of the fugitive, her long knife gleaming in the light of the moon, which was then nearly at the full, and which, streaming through the unshuttered window, had enabled her to follow every movement of the enemy, as well as to satisfy herself that he was

unarmed. It enabled her now for the first time to distinguish his features.

"You!" she ejaculated in horror. "Oh, Val, how *could* you do such a thing?"

The young man stood silently before her, his arms hanging by his sides and his head slightly bent. He looked extremely like a whipped hound, and it is not improbable that that is what he felt like. However, he recovered himself to some extent after a second or two and said admiringly and with a touch of bravado, "By Jove! You have pluck! Fancy your coming down all alone to tackle the midnight malefactor with a knife!"

Chris was neither flattered by his compliment nor angered by his impudence. She too had had time to recover herself, and she only said coldly, "Had you not better go away? I suppose policemen do sometimes pass this house, and if one of them were to notice the open window and were to find you here, with a file and chisel in your hand, it would be rather uncomfortable for us all?"

Val shrugged his shoulders. "It would be uncomfortable for you perhaps; I don't know that it would be particularly so for me. I doubt whether anything could add very much to the discomfort of my present situation.

Still, if you are inclined to let me go, I shall not refuse to do so."

"You may go," said Chris, drawing a little aside as if to let him pass. "Of course you understand that you can never come back here again."

"That, as you say, is a matter of course. I would thank you for your forbearance if I could flatter myself that it was due to any personal regard for me; but you would probably assure me that you are consulting your own convenience rather than mine by allowing me to escape."

He waited for a moment, and then, as she made no reply, placed his knee upon the window-sill, with the apparent intention of scrambling out. But although he was quite conscious that the facts spoke for themselves and that nothing more could be said to any purpose, he found himself unable to make so taciturn and cynical an exit.

"Chris," said he, "you asked me just now how I could do such a thing as this. Well, I don't believe anybody knows what he is capable of in the way of felony until he sees ruin staring him in the face. I discovered yesterday that nothing short of paying up between three and four thousand pounds to-morrow

morning could save me from being branded as a defaulter—which spells ruin in pretty plain characters. Since I couldn't pay and couldn't borrow, my one and only chance was to steal; and as soon as I realised that, I couldn't help thinking of your aunt's safe. You see, if I had succeeded, you certainly wouldn't have dreamt of suspecting me of being the thief, and the odds were all in favour of my succeeding. It was such a simple affair to cut out a pane of glass, push back the bolt of the window and walk in! I confess that I reckoned without you and your knife; but——"

"Have I hurt you much?" interrupted Chris quickly.

"Physically, do you mean? No; I don't think you have hurt me at all, and it wouldn't have mattered if you had. Before many hours are over I shall be out of the reach of physical harm."

Chris caught her breath. "Why do you say that?" she asked.

Perhaps he had enough of manhood left in him to be ashamed of what he had said. At any rate, he laughed it off. "Oh," he returned, "I'm not the sort of person who commits suicide; I'm the sort of person who talks about it and doesn't do it. What will become of me

I can't imagine ; but it is probable that I shall continue to encumber the earth, though I shall cease to be an encumbrance to you. Good-bye, Chris ; I won't ask you to forgive me, and of course I can't ask you to excuse me. I dare say you'll forget me easily enough. Don't marry the red-bearded man, that's all."

Chris was beginning hesitatingly, "If you will wait one moment, Val—I have a little money of my own up stairs, and I don't want you to starve—" But before she could end her sentence he uttered an exclamation, vaulted through the window and vanished into the night. She turned and saw the pale and amazed visage of Martha close to her shoulder.

"Oh, dear, oh, dear!" moaned Martha, wringing her hands, "what a bad job! I 'eard a crash and I come to the top of the stairs—not as I meant to interfere with any burglars, not me!—but, thinks I, 'twill do no 'arm if I was just to ketch a glimpse of his face, so as I might know him again. And then I reckonises your voice, my dear, and I steals down a bit farther, and—oh, Lord! Well, thank 'Evens, he's gone!"

"Martha," said Chris quietly, "you may have recognised my voice ; but you didn't recognise

anything or anybody else. If you thought you did, your senses must have deceived you. I am sure you must understand that I am not strong enough to capture a burglar. Aunt Rebecca will probably be satisfied when she hears that I have had to let him go free, but that her box is safe. And I think we had better go up and tell her so."

Martha compressed her lips and nodded her head emphatically several times. "There's on'y one thing as I should wish to know, miss," said she. "That there—burglar; he won't come back no more, will he?"

"Certainly not," answered Chris. "And now let us set Aunt Rebecca's mind at rest."

That proved to be a task of some difficulty. The old woman had made up her mind that her niece had been murdered and had worked herself up into a state of terror and agitation which gradually gave place to wrath when she was persuaded by ocular evidence that Chris was quite unhurt.

"You cruel child!" she whimpered. "You might have thought of me, lying here helpless; but you chose to stay a whole hour—it can't be less than an hour since you left me—chattering to Martha, who seems to have taken good care not to go down stairs until the coast was clear.

Martha, you can go back to bed. Stop ! before you go, bring the box up here ; you and Chris can carry it between you, and I daren't have it left in the hall."

The box was no light weight, and it was all that two not very strong women could do to get it up into Miss Ramsden's bedroom ; but at length they accomplished their task, and as soon as they had done so Martha was uncere- moniously dismissed. Then the old lady put the key in the lock, turned it, and, with a cunning glance—"Perhaps you would like to see the treasure, my dear ?" said she.

"I don't care to see it," answered Chris ; but as her aunt insisted, she lifted up some sheets of brown paper and disclosed a goodly collection of rusty old bolts and bricks and stones.

"He-he !" chuckled Miss Ramsden ; "Martha's friend wouldn't have gained much for his pains even if you hadn't interrupted him, would he ? Now, Christina, you see what confidence I have in you. I have let you into my secret and you know where my money is not. As for where it is—well, my dear, I don't think I'll tell you that to-night. You shall relate your adventure with the housebreaker to me instead. Perhaps it will send me to sleep."

## CHAPTER XV.

CHRIS had no difficulty in giving such an account of her adventure as would satisfy Miss Ramsden without making compromising revelations. She related how she had heard the burglar in the dining-room, how she had waited for him outside—which accounted for her prolonged absence—how she had sprung upon him when he had at length emerged, and how he had been only too glad to drop his spoil and run away. The unfortunate thing was that her story did not tend to exculpate poor Martha.

“Very well, my dear,” Miss Ramsden said, after Chris had vainly assured her of that faithful creature’s innocence, “keep your opinion and I’ll keep mine. You won’t persuade me that a man who knew nothing about the house would have made straight for the dining-room and spent an hour there, trying to

force open a box which might have contained specimens of minerals and was very unlikely to contain coin of the realm. I shall not dismiss Martha, because she is a useful servant and I might go farther and fare worse. But if she thinks she can deceive me she is very much mistaken."

Chris felt guilty and ashamed! yet she could not bring herself to denounce Val, and it was some comfort to find in the sequel that Martha, to whom these unworthy suspicions were no secret, was very little distressed by them.

"'Twas allus Miss Rebecca's way," she remarked philosophically. "Come to a question of money and she's bound to suspect somebody. If it hadn't bin me 'twould have bin you, my dear, which might have bin a more ork'ard thing. 'Tis best as it is, you may depend. Let alone that she's in that state as she didn't ought to be 'eld accountable for her words."

For this charitable view of Miss Ramsden's case there was certainly some justification. Delighted as the old woman appeared to be by the success of her stratagem, her nerves had had a severe shake, and for some days after the attempted burglary she was in a pitiable condition, alternating between feverish excitement

and abject terror. It was impossible to leave her alone, and as she slept very little, her niece did not get much sleep either. That she really had a considerable sum secreted somewhere about the premises seemed probable, since she was never weary of protesting to Chris that such was not the case.

"I am obliged to mislead that prying Martha," she would say ; "but I won't attempt to mislead you, my dear. I haven't a penny more in the house than is wanted to pay the weekly bills—and very little elsewhere. How could I, with my miserable income, and with all the extra expense that I have been put to since you came to live with me ?"

At other times however she would tell a different tale and lament that she had pinched herself throughout her long life to no purpose. "What has been the use of it ?" she would moan. "I'm a rich woman ; but I'm bed-ridden and dying, and I suppose you'll be glad when I'm gone and you can spend my savings."

Chris was not able to feel any great compassion for the old woman, who, to be sure, did not deserve very much. At any rate, that hint as to the ultimate destination of Miss Ramsden's savings did not propitiate her, as it may

have been intended to do. She was patient with her aunt and unwearied in her attendance upon her ; but she had not forgotten the assassination of Peter, nor could any inheritance, large or small, atone in her eyes for that cruel wrong. Besides, she had other things to think about. She was very uneasy about Val and could hardly even rejoice at being released from her engagement to him, seeing in what way that release had been obtained. The very enormity of his offence showed to what dire straits he must have been reduced before he could have thought of committing it. She was afraid that he must be absolutely destitute, and still more afraid that he might have done what he had declared, with a sneer, that he had not the courage to do and put an end to himself.

Every day she scrutinised the newspapers apprehensively, but found no mention of him therein, either in the character of a suicide or in that of a defaulter.

At length however she received a letter from him which put an end to her anxiety. It was dated "Cadiz," and in his opening sentence the writer softened her heart by saying that he would not have ventured to address her again, had he not thought that she might be pitying him more than he deserved. Then he explained

that he had a well-to-do relative, a Liverpool wine-merchant, to whom he had applied in his extremity, and who had very unexpectedly offered him a place in his house of business at Cadiz, shipping him off to his destination forthwith.

"I suppose," Val wrote, "he thought that was upon the whole the cheapest way of getting quit of me; and it's certain that I can't show my face in England again, with all my bills unpaid, not to speak of what I owe to the bookmakers."

The letter was not an altogether satisfactory one to Chris, except in so far as it proved her correspondent to be no longer in want or despair. He said he was in despair when he reflected upon the sin and folly of which he had been guilty; but long before she had read as far as his signature Chris perceived that he did not quite despair of being forgiven. "Of course," he wrote, "I don't expect any answer to this, and of course, if by any extraordinary chance we should ever meet again, your cutting me dead wouldn't at all surprise me. Still, however insane one may have been, one isn't an absolute monster. One has one's feelings—some of them feelings which nothing except death can change—and that is why I can't

truthfully subscribe myself in any other way than as

“Ever your loving

“VAL RICHARDSON.”

Chris would have preferred his subscribing himself in any other way, even at a slight sacrifice of truth, and it was with sincere relief that she read of his inability to show his face in his native land.

Miss Ramsden, fortunately, made no inquiries about him. Miss Ramsden had ceased to make inquiries about anybody or anything, except when, from time to time, a sudden panic seized her and she took it into her head that Martha was planning some fresh *coup de main*. Slowly but surely she was sinking into her grave; every day she grew a little weaker; and although the change was scarcely perceptible to those about her, the doctor, on his return from his holiday, pursed up his lips and shook his head. He prescribed a nourishing diet, which was unlucky, because that entailed a slight increase of expenditure which his patient was most unwilling to sanction. Only after prolonged argument and persuasion could she be got to sign cheques for small amounts. “You buy more fresh eggs in a week than I used to

buy in a year," she would complain fretfully ; "and why do you make my beef-tea so strong ? We might all live for three or four days upon the meat that you put into it."

"Well, *you* can't live for a day without it now," Martha would rejoin bluntly, "so it's got to be made whether you like it or whether you don't, Miss Rebecca."

"I know I am going to die soon ; I have told you so from the first. And if I am going to die, what is the good of wasting so much money ?" the invalid would plead with an earnestness which was almost pathetic.

But the toughest struggle of all took place when the weather grew so cold. that it was necessary to have a fire in Miss Ramsden's bedroom. Nothing, she declared, should induce her to consent to such an innovation. She could not afford it ; she had never been accustomed to it ; she was sure that it would make her ill. Added to which the chimney had not been swept for years, and the chances were that they would set fire to it and burn the house down. When Martha, disregarding these objections, left the room and presently returned bearing a coal-scuttle and a bundle of sticks, the old woman became agitated to the verge of hysterics.

"Not you, then!" she shrieked. "I won't have it done by you, Martha! If I am to have a fire against my will—and of course I am helpless—Christina, and nobody else, shall light it. Put down your sticks and go away, Martha; we don't want you any more."

That this was no mere caprice was proved after Martha, to humour her mistress, had deposited her burden and retired; for then Miss Ramsden beckoned Chris mysteriously to the bedside and whispered, "Put your hand as far up the chimney as you can reach, my dear, until you feel a ledge on the left-hand side. You will find something there that I want you to bring me."

Chris did as she was told, making herself very sooty in the process, and presently withdrew from the spot indicated a small oblong box of no great weight.

"Papers—only papers," Miss Ramsden explained hastily. "Not valuable in themselves; but I do not wish them to be destroyed. Give me the box quick, before that woman comes back."

"Hadn't I better wipe it first, Aunt Rebecca?" said Chris. "It looks as if it had been up the chimney for a century."

"Wipe it with paper, then; don't waste a

clean towel upon it. What signifies a little soot? There, that will do. Give it me—give it me at once!” And, having clutched her property, Miss Ramsden thrust it down beneath the bed-clothes. “I don’t think it would have struck anybody to search in *that* place, she muttered with a feeble chuckle. “Now you can light the fire if you choose; it is cold for the time of year.”

Not for many days longer was Miss Ramsden vexed by the sight of blazing coals or the taste of unnecessarily potent beef-tea. As her strength ebbed her mind began to wander, and it was only at intervals that she spoke intelligibly or took any notice of what was going on around her. One afternoon the doctor announced that she had scarcely any pulse and that the end was near.

“There isn’t much to be done,” he said to Chris. “Stimulant, of course, if you can get her to swallow it—”

The dying woman suddenly opened her eyes and interrupted him. “Gin,” she said, “will do. It’s the cheapest.”

Those were her last words. Before morning she was dead, and the wealth which she had spent her life in painfully amassing was hers no more.

Man, according to the Psalmist, heapeth up riches and cannot tell who shall gather them ; but the law of the land, as Mr. Compton, who hastened to Balaclava Terrace as soon as he heard of the melancholy event, remarked, is kind enough (in consideration of the payment of certain duties) to allow him some voice in the matter ; and what Mr. Compton was very anxious to find out was whether Miss Ramsden had availed herself of that privilege. The deceased lady having had neither kith nor kin, with the exception of her niece, it seemed to devolve as much upon him as upon anybody else to make the requisite search ; and he was rewarded by the discovery of a will of quite recent date, and singularly few provisions. In this instrument he found himself nominated as co-executor with the late Miss Ramsden's banker ; and it was his pleasing duty to announce to his cousin that she was the sole inheritress of her aunt's estate, subject only to the deduction of an annuity of fifty pounds, "payable to my old servant, Martha Stubbs."

On the day of the funeral Chris was made acquainted with the fact that she was a considerable heiress ; but it was not until some weeks later that anything like a correct estimate of the value of her possessions could be arrived

at. The late Miss Ramsden's bankers held her securities; but the amount of specie which she had kept in her own hands was only ascertained after every nook and cranny in her house had been thoroughly overhauled. The box which Chris had withdrawn from its place of concealment up the chimney was stuffed full of bank-notes; more of these were discovered in cupboards of which the keys were not at first forthcoming; the hearthstone of an unfurnished bedroom, which showed signs of having been disturbed, was lifted, and disclosed a heap of between three and four hundred sovereigns. By the time that every possible investigation had been made Mr. Compton estimated that the entire estate, invested and uninvested, reached the respectable figure of ninety thousand pounds.

"And am I to have the spending of all that?" Chris inquired, when she was told what the probable income arising out of this sum would be.

"Well, yes," answered her guardian; "the annual income will be payable to you until you come of age, when the capital, together with what you have inherited from your father, will be at your absolute disposition. It is perhaps rather a pity; but so it is."

"I shall never be able to spend it," said Chris.

"Possibly not ; but others will no doubt be willing to spend it for you. Now, as to Mr. Richardson—"

"All is over between him and me," interrupted Chris quickly. "I have broken off the engagement, and he has left England. It is quite agreed that we are to be strangers henceforth."

Mr. Compton said he was very glad indeed to hear that, but seemed a trifle incredulous. "It is not improbable," he remarked, "that when Mr. Richardson hears how greatly your means have been increased, you may be put to some further inconvenience by his—er—impertinities. In such an event your best plan would be to refer him to me. His power to injure you is less, distinctly less, now than it was a month or two ago."

"I don't think he wants to injure me at all," said Chris ; "and even if he did, I don't see how he could."

"Oh, he *could*—after a fashion. I pointed that out to you in Paris, as you may recollect. Still his power is not so great as it was ; for his conduct since that time has been such as to warrant our breaking off the engagement. Of

course you do not forget that there are two other men who are in possession of your secret."

"There need be no secret about the matter," Chris returned; "I don't think I should care very much if all the world knew that I had run away from Aunt Rebecca. It may have been a foolish thing to do; but I can't see that it was disgraceful."

"Surely you can see, Christina, that that is not the point. The point is that both these men believe that you ran away to meet Mr. Richardson; and if you were to deny that until you were black in the face, it is in the last degree improbable that they would be so simple as to accept your denial."

Chris looked distressed and remained silent for a few moments. "I should not like Mr. Severne to think so badly of me," she said at last. "Why should he not accept my word? He is a gentleman. As far as that goes, Mr. Ellacombe is a gentleman too—by birth."

The lawyer made a grimace. "My dear Christina," said he, "the fact that a man is a gentleman does not compel him to give credence to absurdities. These two gentlemen saw you in Paris in the company of a—well, let us say an individual, to whom you appear to have

told them that you were engaged, adding, very gratuitously, that you had run away from England. If you now inform them that your engagement is at an end, that you only met Mr. Richardson by chance, and that you fled from your aunt's house because she had poisoned your dog, they may, out of politeness, pretend to believe your story; but of course they won't really believe it. Were I in their place I certainly should not."

"Well," said Chris in despair, "it can't be helped. Very likely I shall never meet either of them again. I want, if I may, to go as soon as possible to the Lavergues. They have written to me since Aunt Rebecca died, begging me to pay them a visit, and they know all about my having run away. Would there be any objection to my spending the winter at Cannes?"

The lawyer stroked his chin and said, No; he did not think that there would be any objection. The question of what was to be done with this young heiress had been rather a puzzle to him. His wife had been anxious that she should take up her abode under their roof, paying a reasonable sum in acknowledgment of the shelter afforded to her; but he had sense enough to see that that arrangement would

never work. Mrs. Compton was a lady of peremptory habits and uncertain temper; Chris was, to say the least of it, fond of her own way and inclined to take it. Besides, the girl was really too rich to be kept under proper control. Provisionally, at all events, it would be as well to let her do as she wished. Possibly she might find a husband before long and so relieve him of future responsibility.

It was, perhaps, this latter reflection which prompted him to remark wistfully, "I wish you would marry that young Severne, Christina. He is, as you say, a gentleman, and considering what your present circumstances are, his family would hardly oppose the match, I should think. In that way, too, you would at least secure his silence about your ill-advised freak."

"I have quite made up my mind not to marry anybody," replied Chris composedly. "Of course it would be a high honour for me to be accepted by Mr. Severne; but I don't think I should care to buy the consent of his family. I want to get away to my dear old Laverghes and forget England and how miserable I have been here."

"Well, well!" answered Mr. Compton; "so be it. For the coming winter there will be no harm in your being out of England; but you

cannot very well expatriate yourself permanently, and I am sorry that you should wish to do so. I can conscientiously say that we have done what was in our power to reconcile you to your own country."

"Yes, I believe you have," Chris acknowledged, half laughing. "You did what you could, and so did Lady Barnstaple, and Martha, and perhaps even poor old Aunt Rebecca; but somehow you haven't succeeded, any of you. I can't feel grateful to Aunt Rebecca for leaving me all this money; I can't feel that anybody here really cares a bit about me. The Laverignes do care for me; it is all the same to them whether I am rich or poor; they haven't so much as thought of asking whether I had inherited anything from my aunt or not."

So it was agreed that Chris should accept the invitation of these disinterested friends, and within a week of the day on which the above colloquy took place she started on her southward journey, followed by the benedictions of Martha, to whom she had presented a substantial token of her regard.

## CHAPTER XVI.

How delightful it was to be in the bright south again, to feel that there was a real sun in the heavens above and here and there a real friend or two on the earth below! What a relief it was to have done with squalor and ignoble penury, to be delivered from an engagement which ought never to have been entered into, to come and go at will—in a word, to be as free as air!

This was the sort of thing that Chris kept ejaculating to herself from morning to night after her arrival at Cannes; and perhaps she would not have indulged in such ejaculations quite so often if she had been sure of being as happy as by rights she ought to have been. The Laverignes were kindness itself. They received her and treated her like a daughter of their own, showing her, indeed, more consideration than the generality of parents are accus-

tomed to show to their children, in that they asked no questions at all and allowed her to tell them as much or as little as she pleased about the events of the past summer and autumn. Other old friends, too, turned up, and were loud and hearty in their welcome. José, back from a pedestrian circuit among Pyrenean watering-places; the man who sold roasted chestnuts; the shabby *sergent de ville*; the Italian musicians and the good-humoured lazy beggars—with all of these it was a joy and a wonder to chat just as of yore; because not one of them was a bit changed, and none of them seemed to realise what an immense period of time had elapsed since the “last season,” of which they spoke as though it had ended the day before yesterday. Yet beneath all these pleasant renewals of old associations there lurked an *amari aliquid* of which Chris was increasingly conscious. “*Rien n’est changé; il n’y a qu’un Français de plus,*” said the king of France, when he returned to a country in which everything was changed except himself. Chris was in the opposite predicament; for although Cannes and its inhabitants remained unaltered, she was no longer the girl who had once been happy there; and what was unfortunate and inexplicable was that

the things which had formerly sufficed to make her happy had now lost that power. Well, to be sure, her father was dead, which was a good and respectable reason for sadness ; only, when she examined herself, she found that that was not the real reason : or at any rate, not the sole one. Then poor dear Peter was no more, and she missed him at every turn ; yet somehow or other the loss of Peter did not seem altogether to account for the listlessness and weariness which oppressed her. " I don't know what is the matter with me," Chris said 'to herself with a sigh ; " but everything seems very unsatisfactory."

It was Dr. Lavergne who at length enlightened her as to the true nature of her malady. The Doctor had heard from his wife, who had heard from Chris herself, all that could be safely told about Val Richardson, and he knew that the girl was well rid of a bad bargain. Also he was acquainted with the episodes attendant upon her flight to Paris ; for of these she made no secret. Now, with such facts before him, and with certain well-known and unmistakable symptoms staring him in the face, Dr. Lavergne had made a diagnosis of her case which he flattered himself was substantially accurate. Only he could not prescribe a

remedy, because, for one thing, he did not believe in prescriptions of any kind, and for another, he needed some further information before he could even suggest a possible cure.

Therefore, while she was helping him to tie up his roses one afternoon, he said abruptly : "Mademoiselle, you are worrying yourself, and that is an extremely foolish thing to do. People who worry themselves become prematurely wrinkled."

"I don't think I am worrying myself," Chris answered. "What have I to worry me?"

"Ah, that is what you should know better than I ; but if you really do not know, I might try to guess. Meanwhile, let me assure you that when you are thirty years of age you will bitterly regret having drawn lines in your face which can never be rubbed out, and which in all probability will have no justification for their existence. What are the genuine troubles of life? Disease, sin, want, and the death of those whom we have loved. From the first three of these you are as free as any one can be; from the last I admit that you have suffered; but unless I am very much mistaken, it is not from that that you are suffering now. I conclude, then, that your trouble is of the

imaginary class, and since you will not name it, I will, with your permission, hazard a little conjecture. Your mind is disturbed because you cannot forget that two men once saw you in an equivocal situation in Paris, and because you are afraid that one or other of them will reveal what he saw and what he thought. It would be impossible to conceive of a more, groundless apprehension. You will not accuse me of thinking too well of my fellow-creatures ; but I venture to assure you that no man of honour (I do not speak of women, they are different) would dream of saying a word about such an encounter."

"Perhaps not," said Chris. She added after a moment, "It is not their talking about what they saw that I am afraid of."

"Then," said Doctor Lavergne, lifting his head quickly and looking straight at her through his spectacles, "it must be that you attach particular importance to the personal opinion of one of these gentlemen."

There was some indiscretion, not to say brutality, in this speech ; but Doctor Lavergne, who was neither indiscreet nor brutal, had his reasons for uttering it. He wanted to befriend the girl, and he could not do that without extorting an admission, tacit or other, from

her; so that he was completely baffled and surprised when Chris, without a shade of embarrassment, replied :

“ I do attach a good deal of importance to Mr. Severne’s opinion. He and I were friends at Brentstow, and I could see by his face, when we parted in Paris, that he despised me. As for Mr. Ellacombe, he may think what he pleases.”

“ When you next meet Mr. Severne you had better tell him the whole truth,” said the Doctor; “ but in the meantime, you may be sure that if his good opinion is worth having at all, you will not have lost it. He will have blamed Mr. Richardson, not you. They generally do : and it is nothing to the point that they are generally wrong. Come ! if you have no worse trouble than that to brood over you are a very fortunate young lady.”

So saying, the old man trotted away into the house, thinking to himself, “ I suppose there is some other young man then whom we have not heard of.”

But although the Doctor’s chance shot had proved a miss, so far as he was concerned, it had an undesigned success of which he was ignorant. After she was left alone, Chris thought over what he had said, and of course

she understood what he had been driving at ; and so it came to pass that all of a sudden she knew for certain what she had more than once vaguely suspected, but had never put into plain words. Such discoveries have different effects upon different people. To Chris it could not, under the circumstances, be anything but painful to acknowledge that she loved Gerald Severne ; yet her predominating sensation was not so much one of pain as of extreme astonishment. The possibility of Gerald's falling in love with her had been placed before her plainly enough more than once. Lady Barnstaple had spoken of it as an undesirable event, and Mr. Compton had mentioned it in the contrary sense ; but neither of them had made her doubt for a moment of her personal safety. And now, after all, it turned out that she was the one who ought to have been cautioned ; for it was very evident that, knowing what he knew about her, Gerald would think of her no more, even as a friend. Warnings however would have done little good. She recognised the fact that she had loved him from the first, and would have loved him whether he had cared for her or not. It was her fate, she supposed.

Not until the following morning did she begin to feel wretched and humiliated. It is, no doubt,

a humiliating thing for a woman to become enamoured of a man without having received due encouragement. She ought to wait until she is asked, just as children are expected to keep silence until they are spoken to. It seems a little hard upon the women and children ; but in their own interest, as well as in that of the community at large, these regulations must be observed. Chris, who had plenty of common sense, was quite ready to admit that, and consequently had to admit that she had more or less disgraced herself. Whether she could possibly have helped disgracing herself to that extent was another question : the main thing was that she should henceforth conceal her guilty secret , and as a first step towards doing so, she assumed an air of cheerfulness and jollity at the breakfast hour which deceived neither the Doctor nor his less observant wife.

“That poor child has something on her mind,” said the latter to the former after Chris had left the room.

“I am much indebted to you for the information, my dear,” replied the Doctor, who was apt to be a little irritable during the early hours of the day. “Allow me to inform you in return that you have a nose upon your face and that I have a pair of eyes in my head.

What would increase my already high opinion of your sagacity would be to hear from you exactly what it is that the child has upon her mind."

Madame Lavergne at once confessed her inability to earn the reward named upon those terms, whereupon the Doctor rejoined tartly,

"Then if I were you, I should feel ashamed of myself. A woman who can't find out what is the matter with another woman!—although I dare say it would not make much difference if you could."

Chris meanwhile had sauntered down to the end of the garden, where she met the postman, who handed her a letter which had been forwarded from London. This proved to be an invitation from Lady Barnstaple, who had returned to Brentstow and who begged her to "run down to us for a week or two before we go abroad for the winter." Her ladyship wrote very affectionately.

"We are dying to see you again," said she, "and the longer you can stay with us the better we shall be pleased. I saw the announcement of your aunt's death in the papers. Has she left you anything?—and what are your plans for the future? But you can answer these and other questions when we meet."

There was no mention of Gerald in the letter: but Mr. Ellacombe's name appeared in a postscript. "Our poor neighbour at Hatherford," Lady Barnstaple wrote, "is said to be in bad health and spirits and certainly looks very glum. I met him the other day and stopped to speak to him, but he would only grunt at me. Perhaps when you come you will be able to draw him out of his shell. As far as I know, you are the only person who has ever succeeded in so doing."

Ellacombe then had evidently kept his own counsel. Chris was grateful to him for his forbearance, but was not sorry that she could give so excellent a reason for leaving him in his shell. By return of post she expressed her thanks and regrets to Lady Barnstaple, but did not think it necessary to allude to Mr. Ellacombe or to her improved circumstances. She had begun a fresh chapter in her life, she thought, and in that chapter the Severnes were not likely to play any part. Situated as she was, the best thing that she could do was to think as little as possible about the past. This might have been a sensible enough resolution to make if she had had any definite future to look forward to; but since she had none, she was of course

unable to carry it into effect. Besides, one does not so easily break with the past. As the winter went on and the English colony began to arrive, visitors and visiting cards came to Miss Compton in respectable numbers. Old friends of her father's sought her out; the Duchess of Islay asked her to tea; a great many people whose existence she had forgotten had apparently remembered her and were anxious to be kind to her; and oddly enough, they all seemed to have discovered that she was now an heiress.

Doctor Lavergne was very caustic in his remarks about these amiably-disposed callers. "They were not so eager to thrust themselves forward last year," he would observe; "but they are evidently overcoming their natural timidity now, and who knows how far they may go with a little more encouragement? They may even end by finding out that I live here and deigning to shake hands with me when they do me the honour to cross my humble threshold."

The truth is that some of the ladies and gentlemen who had paid their respects to Miss Compton had not been quite as punctilious as they might have been in recognising the presence of her host and hostess; but no such

reproach could fairly be laid to the charge of a stout, good-humoured looking lady who was shown into Madame Lavergne's drawing-room one afternoon in the month of January, and who lost no time in saying that anybody who had been a friend to her dear little Chris was a friend of her own. There is no reason to doubt that Lady Barnstaple was perfectly sincere. She had always been fond of Chris, and had shown her affection under other circumstances, so far as it had been possible for her to do so ; but ninety thousand pounds does make a difference, and there would be very good reason indeed to doubt the sincerity of any lady who should assert the contrary.

When Chris came into the room she was warmly embraced and not less warmly congratulated. " I read about your aunt's will in the *Illustrated London News*," Lady Barnstaple said, " and I never was more pleased in my life. Fancy being as rich and living in such a hole ! However, if she had lived elsewhere perhaps she wouldn't have had as much to leave ; so we won't complain. Well, here we are again you see ; and here I suppose we shall remain until after Easter. Come and sit down beside me, and tell me all your news."

" I don't think I have any to tell, Lady

Barnstaple," answered Chris. "I came here soon after Aunt Rebecca died, and nothing has happened to me since."

"Oh!" said Lady Barnstaple, to whom this announcement seemed to come as somewhat of a relief; "then I'll tell you mine, of which I have quite a budget. First of all, have you seen anything of that Mr. Richardson lately?"

Chris shook her head.

"So much the better! He is somewhere abroad, I hear, and no doubt he will try to pick up old acquaintances if he can. I don't know whether you have heard that he levanted in the autumn, leaving his accounts unsettled. Lord Barnstaple saw him once or twice at Newmarket and heard of his goings on. A most disreputable young man by all accounts; and if you should come across him again you had better look the other way. Well, then there is poor Mr. Ellacombe—what do you think has happened to poor Mr. Ellacombe? He has actually gone and married; and the unfortunate thing is that his wife is a person whom one can't know. I shall always think that you are a little bit to blame for this catastrophe, Chris; though of course one wouldn't have wished you to prevent it in the only way in which it could have been

prevented. After all perhaps he may find Mrs. Ellacombe a congenial companion ; for rumour says that she is not precisely a total abstainer, and I am afraid there can be no question about his own tendencies."

"I thought you had a better opinion of him," Chris could not help saying.

"Oh, well, one tries to hope for the best ; but at all events he is married now, and there's an end of him. When will you come and spend a day with us, Chris ? Gracie is longing to see you and tell you all about her engagement to Lord Forfar, whom I think you saw at Brentstow. He is a very nice fellow in every way, and we are very much pleased with the match, and you may congratulate us all round if you like."

Chris availed herself heartily of this gracious permission. She was fond of Lady Grace, and though she could not remember much about Lord Forfar, she remembered that he was young and good-looking, and said so.

"Yes ;" Lady Barnstaple answered, "and what is even more to the purpose is, that he is sure to succeed his father before long, which will make him immensely rich. When we left England the old man was only being kept alive by brandy and beaten-up eggs ; so that one

may reasonably hope to get the funeral and a decent period of mourning over before the spring, when, according to present arrangements, Gracie is to be married."

Dr. Lavergne, who had come in from the garden and had been duly presented to Lady Barnstaple, was so tickled by these last words that he could not repress an abrupt chuckle ; whereupon his visitor stared at him for a moment and then joined in his merriment quite good-humouredly.

"I thought," she remarked, "that you didn't understand English."

The Doctor explained that, although he did not speak our language, he understood it a little. "And," added he, with a bow, "I am beginning to understand the English character, for which I entertain the warmest admiration. You have, if I may be permitted to say so, a frankness of speech which no other nation can attempt to rival."

"Well," said Lady Barnstaple, getting up, "some of us have ; but I don't know that it is exactly a national characteristic. In our class one meets with quite a large number of people who say what they think, because there really is no reason why they shouldn't ; but the English *bourgeois* is a sad imposter, like the

*bourgeois* of other countries, and he is always inclined to shy at his own shadow, as they all are."

Possibly these sentiments may have nettled the Doctor, whose republicanism was that of the year 1848, or it may be that he was a little bit jealous of Lady Barnstaple, who unceremoniously arranged that Chris should spend the whole of the next day with her, and seemed to take it for granted that the girl would be only too glad of an outing. Anyhow, his visitor had no sooner departed than he observed, "She is droll, miladi, and she has an air of being very outspoken ; but I am not convinced that she says quite all that she thinks, or that she is not just as capable of hatching transparent little plots as any *bourgeoise* in France or England. Have you a *Journal des Étrangers*, my dear ?"

Madame Lavergne was sorry that she had not. "What do you want it for, *mon ami* ?" she inquired innocently.

"Oh, I was only curious to see whether Mr. Severne had arrived from Paris yet ; but perhaps it will not be until the next list is issued that we shall find his name," replied the Doctor, trotting out rapidly into the garden, as his habit was when he wished to avoid being called upon to explain himself.

## CHAPTER XVII.

IN justice to Dr. Lavergne, it must be remembered that he had tested Chris with a view to discovering whether she cherished any tender sentiment for Mr. Severne, and that he had come to the conclusion that she was free from any such weakness. His sarcastic allusions to the designs of Lady Barnstaple were not therefore intended to wound her feelings, and no one would have been more sorry than he, had he known that he had been the means of inflicting an almost sleepless night upon her. Chris did not believe that Gerald would come to Cannes, or even that he would be sent for ; yet what the Doctor had said made her realise for the first time the pinch of wealth. It is no such unhappy fate to be rich—all things considered, it is a great deal worse to be poor—but the defects of what one possesses are, of course, always more conspicuous than its advan-

tages, and the drawback to being an heiress is that melancholy doubt which must be present to all heiresses as to whether they are loved for themselves or for their dowry.

One discovery leads to another. After Chris had wept a little over the cynicism of Dr. Lavergne and the worldliness of Lady Barnstaple, she found out that she would hardly have been moved to the point of tears by either of these distressing traits if she had not been harbouring a secret hope that, some day or other, Gerald would seek her and find her and allow her a chance of explaining how it was that she had been seen walking in the streets of Paris with no other companion than Val Richardson. It would have been generous of him to give her such an opportunity in the days of her poverty ; but the generosity would be less evident now ; and it is a remarkable proof of the unhealthy condition of mind into which young women with plenty of money and no occupation are apt to fall that before daybreak Chris had firmly resolved to live and die an old maid. She was displeased with Dr. Lavergne, which was pardonable enough ; she was displeased with Lady Barnstaple, and that also was not very unnatural ; but she certainly had no business to be displeased with poor Gerald, whose behaviour since his encounter with her had been quite unexception-

able. He had held his tongue and he had left her alone : what more could any man with the feelings of a gentleman do ? Chris however was unreasonable enough to quarrel with him for his discretion and to say to herself that if he had cared in the least for her, he would not have remained silent and quiescent so long. His coming forward now—should he be persuaded by his mother to do so—would only show that he thought ninety thousand pounds worth a small sacrifice of pride.

Towards morning she fell asleep, but did not get nearly as many hours of rest as persons of her age require ; so that, in spite of all her efforts to summon up a cheerful expression, it was a somewhat weary and drawn face that she took to Lady Barnstaple's villa, in the garden of which she was met by Lady Grace.

" I saw you from my bedroom window, and I thought I would come down and intercept you," Lady Grace said. " There are some people in the drawing-room who are going to stay to luncheon ; but we needn't go in yet. And how have you been all this long time, Chris ? And why have you never written to me ? "

" You never wrote to me," Chris remarked.

" Well, no," answered Lady Grace, laughing ;  
" that is true. I did mean to write, and I was

often upon the point of doing it ; but I always put it off because—well, I'll explain to you afterwards why I didn't write. Do you know that you are not looking at all well, Chris ?”

“I have rather a headache this morning,” said Chris ; “otherwise there's nothing the matter with me.” Then she expressed her congratulations and begged to be told all about Lord Forfar ; though her friend assured her that there was really nothing to tell.

“Forfar,” Lady Grace declared, “is a commonplace young man, as you must have noticed, and I am a commonplace young woman, as you know ; so that we shall get on very well together and live happily to the end of our days, I hope. Our relations are pleased with us ; but they are not very much interested in us, and indeed one couldn't expect it of them. We are not interesting. Now *you* are very interesting, Chris, and that's why I want to talk to you about yourself.”

But Chris, who was by no means anxious to talk about herself, insisted upon categorical answers to a number of questions relating to Lord Forfar and the approaching wedding ; and it was not until the two girls had been seated for half an hour on the shady side of a mimosa that she found herself compelled to take her turn of submitting to cross-examination.

"Have you no news to give me?" Lady Grace inquired. "Nothing about Mr. Richardson, for instance?"

"I suppose, from your asking that question," answered Chris, "that you know I was once engaged to him. I did not exactly wish it; but circumstances brought it about. The engagement is broken off now."

"Oh, I am so glad! Mamma told me that there was a sort of half-and-half engagement—"

"She promised not to betray that secret," remarked Chris parenthetically.

"I am sure she hasn't told anybody but me. And so it is really at an end! I am delighted to hear it; for I never thought him at all nice, and lately I have been told some very unpleasant things about him."

Chris not feeling called upon to make any rejoinder, a pause followed, after which Lady Grace resumed: "There is somebody else who will be even more glad than I am to hear that you are not going to marry Mr. Richardson."

"Is there?" said Chris.

"As if you didn't know that as well as I do. Only perhaps you don't know quite as well as I do what a good, steady fellow he is, and what a real piece of luck it is for any girl to be cared for by him. Even my father, who isn't given to praising his children, admits that Gerald is

a paragon. He has always paid his own bills ; he has never got into scrapes of any kind——”

“ I have no doubt that he is perfect,” interrupted Chris, laughing a little constrainedly ; “ but I must take great care not to be dazzled by his perfections. Lady Barnstaple very kindly warned me about that when I was at Brentstow. She said he might admire me, and of course I should naturally admire him ; but it would be a very sad thing if we were to allow this mutual admiration to go too far, because Lord Barnstaple would never hear of his marrying me. So there was nothing for it but to telegraph to Aunt Rebecca and take to my heels.”

“ Yes, I know,” answered Lady Grace tranquilly. “ Mamma meant to be kind ; and I really think that under the circumstances she was kind. However fond people may be of one another, they can’t marry upon an income which won’t support them. But now the circumstances are altogether changed, you see.”

“ So I hear,” observed Chris. “ People who are by way of knowing the world assure me that a capital of ninety thousand pounds makes all the difference. But then I too, in my humble way, have ideas as to what will do and what won’t. Perhaps I don’t altogether like to be told, ‘ With a mere three hundred a

year, we can't look at you, and the sooner you take yourself off the better; but if you can really bring us as much as three or four thousand a year we shall be willing to do business with you.' Perhaps I may fancy that it would be wiser to keep my three thousand a year and my liberty."

"That is very unfair, Chris," Lady Grace declared. "Gerald never asked or thought about your money. My father would have thought about it, of course, just as all fathers do; but Gerald would have been only too delighted to starve with you in a garret. He told me all about it the day you left Brentstow, and I promised that I would befriend him if I could."

"You didn't do a great deal to befriend him," remarked Chris, who could not help being pleased and mollified by this revelation.

"What could I do? I gave him your address in London, which I thought at the time was rather wrong of me, and he called upon you and didn't see you. After that—"

"Well, what after that?" asked Chris a little anxiously.

"I don't know; I thought perhaps you would be able to tell me. Gerald had to return to Paris before his leave was up, and since then there has been a change. He seemed to think

that there was no chance for him, and I fancied that he might have heard something about you and Mr. Richardson. Something more, at least ; for I confess I told him what I had heard from mamma."

"I am glad he didn't tell you," said Chris meditatively ; "but I don't think there is any harm in your hearing the truth now. I ran away from my aunt. She poisoned my dear Peter, and I felt that I couldn't live with her after that ; so I made my escape from London, meaning to come on here to the Laverignes, who I knew would receive me. Unfortunately I had to stay a day in Paris, and I came across Mr. Richardson there quite by chance, and then, while I was walking with him, we ran against your brother. I was obliged to give some explanation, and I gave a very stupid one, I'm afraid ; for your brother seems to have gone away with the idea that he had met with a runaway couple. Perhaps when you write to him you might tell him that it was not as he thought. My cousin, James Compton, pursued me and told me that Aunt Rebecca was very ill, and so I went back to England that same night. It was thought best that, after what had happened (for by an extraordinary stroke of bad luck Mr. Ellacombe also saw me in Paris), my engagement to Mr. Richardson should be ac-

knowledge; but afterwards he behaved in a way that enabled me to claim my release. That's all."

"Oh, now I understand!" said Lady Grace musingly. She took Chris by the hand and looked into her face with a smile. "What am I to tell Gerald?" she asked.

"Nothing more than just what I have told you," answered Chris. "After all, I believe I would rather that you told him nothing. Let him think what he likes. The only thing that I don't at all want him to think is that—that—"

"Oh, he won't think anything of that sort," Grace declared laughing; "Gerald has a very modest opinion of himself. All that I am afraid of is that he is too modest, and that he will require a great deal of backing up before he will consent to fight his own battle. Especially now that he knows how rich you have become."

"Dr. Lavergne," remarked Chris slowly, "said a thing yesterday which I didn't like. He said Lady Barnstaple would ask Mr. Severne to come here at once."

Lady Grace laughed again; but her laughter sounded somewhat forced and she coloured a little. She had opened her lips to make some reply when a servant came out of the house to tell the young ladies that everybody had sat

down to luncheon ; and so the dialogue came to an end.

Lady Barnstaple belonged to that set of people who move about in a pack. They are in London during the season ; then they are at Goodwood and Cowes ; then they march in a compact mass upon Scotland ; then they meet one another at various country houses ; and after that a good many of them go to Cannes for the winter. A good many of them were assembled round the luncheon-table at which Lady Grace and Chris took their places, and they were talking, as they always do, with immense interest about one another's affairs, so that the latter was neither noticed nor addressed. She was glad enough to be so insignificant and to be free to pursue her own meditations, which however received an abrupt check when she overheard her hostess saying : " Yes, Gerald arrived last night. I begged him to ask for a week's leave to see his mother, and I need hardly add that he has gone off to Monte Carlo for the day."

" How imprudent of you ! " somebody exclaimed. " Fancy deliberately inviting one's son to the neighbourhood of Monte Carlo ! "

To which Lady Barnstaple responded with a demure smile, " Oh, I'm not so imprudent as I look."

Chris threw a reproachful glance across the table at Lady Grace, who shrugged her shoulders very slightly, and Dr. Lavergne gained then and there a reputation for sagacity which may have been a trifle above his deserts.

After luncheon Lady Barnstaple was very affectionate to her young friend, who, for her part, was extremely cold and stiff; but later in the afternoon, when her mother had gone out for a drive and the party had dispersed, Lady Grace found an opportunity of enunciating sentiments which had at least the merit of common sense.

"You have no reason to be affronted, Chris," said she; "and if mamma had not been fond of you personally I doubt whether ninety thousand pounds would have tempted her. It is a good large fortune, but it isn't enormous; and I dare say she would tell you that Gerald might do better from a worldly point of view. As for him, I must leave him to convince you that he isn't mercenary. If he can't do it, of course I can't. I persuaded him to go to Monte Carlo to-day, because I wanted him to be out of the way. He didn't know why he had been summoned, and when I told him he was so incredulous and so despondent that I thought I had better see you and find out whether there was any use in his staying on.

After what I have heard I shall advise him to stay ; it seems to me it may be worth his while."

Receiving no reply, Lady Grace added : " Perhaps it is only fair to tell you that he was to come back by the four o'clock train, and that he may be here at any moment."

Thereupon Chris jumped up briskly, said good-bye, and walked away as fast as she could. This was just what Lady Grace had felt sure that she would do ; and she also felt sure that, if the train kept its time with anything like punctuality, her brother must infallibly encounter Chris on his way up from the station. More than that she could not very well have done for him, and she had a tolerably strong conviction that he would not stand in need of any further assistance.

But Chris, as she hastened on her way without any thought of meeting Gerald Severne, was not at all sure that she would accept him if at any future time he should ask her to be his wife. She had as yet hardly taken in the meaning of what Lady Grace had told her ; she was still, and perhaps rather unjustifiably, sore against Lady Barnstaple ; she did not relish the idea of being tolerated on account of the hoarded treasure which had been bequeathed to her. Possibly also she may

have been inwardly conscious that a word or two from Gerald would conquer all her doubts and scruples; for as she drew nearer to the station it suddenly dawned upon her that she was walking along the road by which he must needs make his way homewards; and as soon as she realised that fact she struck off into a by-path between two high walls, which, she flattered herself, would effectually screen her from view.

This strategic movement was not executed with such rapidity but that somebody who had been scrutinising her figure from afar caught sight of it and promptly started in pursuit. The legs of the pursuer being long, and his anxiety to catch her up very great, it was not many minutes before she heard the sound of approaching footsteps behind her, whereupon she immediately quickened her pace, without looking over her shoulder. But escape, as she very soon perceived, was impossible. Four miles an hour is probably the outside walking speed which can be attained by any wearer of petticoats, and it would be too ridiculous to break into a run. Chris therefore adopted the more dignified course of turning at bay, thereby bringing herself face to face—not with Gerald Severne, but with Val Richardson!

There was a change in Val's appearance—a

change of which the details were not at once perceptible to feminine eyes, although the general effect was. He was no longer fashionably clad ; he wore a black coat and waistcoat ; the pearl had disappeared from his necktie ; he looked like a banker's clerk out for a holiday, and somehow or other he seemed to be much more at home and in his proper place thus attired than in the borrowed plumes wherewith he had decked himself out for a season. There was a change too in his manner, which had lost all trace of swagger. He took off his hat and said quite humbly : " I saw you and I couldn't resist following you. I wanted to hear from your own lips that you had forgiven me."

Perhaps this was not quite the most judicious possible mode of addressing a lady who did not want to be addressed at all. Anyhow Chris felt annoyed with him and a little inclined to despise him, and thought that, since he was at Cannes, he would have shown better taste by avoiding her. However, she was reluctant to hit a man who was down ; so she answered : " I forgave you long ago, Mr. Richardson ; I thought you understood that. And I was very glad to hear that you had found something to do and were not in want any more. Still, after all that has happened, it would be better

for us not to meet again. You are only passing through Cannes, I suppose?"

Val smiled. "I have come all the way from Cadiz to see you," he replied. "I heard that you were here, and I came, borrowing the money for the journey and very nearly quarrelling with my employer, who didn't seem to believe that a rich relative of mine was dying at Nice and had telegraphed for me. Chris, if you have really forgiven me, as you say you have, can't you give me a shred of hope? You know how I love you, and you can imagine what sort of an existence I have to look forward to without you. You did like me a little once—I'm sure you did!"

"No," exclaimed Chris, whose heart had been touched for a moment, but who was determined that there should be no misconception upon this point; "I never liked you in the way that you mean! If I had, perhaps your having tried to rob Aunt Rebecca would have made no difference—I don't know. As it was, I was only too glad and thankful to be free. It may sound unkind to say so, but it is the truth. I never should have consented to be engaged to you if my cousin had not insisted upon it. He said you had a hold over me because of our having been seen together in Paris."

"I think," observed Val, "you forget that there was something very like an engagement between us before that time. You didn't quite refuse me, you know; you gave me to understand that there was nobody else whom you liked better."

"Nor was there," answered Chris slowly; "but——"

"But what? Is there somebody else now, then? Good heavens, Chris! is it possible that you can have fallen in love with that red-bearded fellow?"

"Certainly not! I wish you would not say such unpleasant things. As it happens, Mr. Ellacombe is married already; but in any case——"

"Then it is the other one," interrupted Val. "I thought as much! Trust old Lady Barnstaple to snap up ninety thousand pounds when she gets the chance! Well, I admire her promptitude; but I can't say that I admire your discernment. A man who is willing to make love to you after seeing what Mr. Severne saw in Paris must be a man with no sort of foolish pride about him."

"You are very insolent," said Chris coldly; "but I don't see what you can expect to gain by your insolence. I have not seen Mr. Severne and I don't want to see him; but

he has nothing whatever to do with the—the disgust that I feel for you. It is horrid to have to say such a thing, but I am sure that you would not have come here if you had not heard that I had inherited Aunt Rebecca's money."

This was quite true, and Val regretted that in his chagrin he had let out his knowledge of the fact that Chris was now richer by ninety thousand pounds than when he had seen her last. He had played his cards rather clumsily ; but then, to be sure, his cards had not been worth much even to a skilful player. He produced the last one now, and did so with a bravado which would of itself have sufficed to insure its failure.

"Listen to me, Chris," said he. "I'm not going to pretend that I'm over and above scrupulous ; you know enough of me by this time to know that, and you know also that I love you. I won't see you married to any other man living if I can help it, and you must see that I can easily enough prevent Severne from marrying you. Engage yourself to him, and I give you my word that I'll go straight to Lady Barnstaple and tell her that you ran off to Paris to meet me. You won't be able to disprove it, and I can as good as prove it. People can't be married at a day's notice, you

must remember ; so I leave you to judge whether Lady Barnstaple will have courage enough to welcome a daughter-in-law about whom her friends will have every excuse for saying some queer things."

If the disgraceful unmanliness of this threat did not deprive it of all its terrors for Chris, it was at all events sufficient to render any further intercourse between her and Val Richardson impossible. She turned away without a word and walked quickly back towards the high road, whither she thought that he would be less likely to follow her than if she were to proceed on her way towards the less frequented quarter for which she had been bound.

However he did follow her. He had burnt his ships, and he knew very well that if he could not get her to listen to him now, no second opportunity of doing so would be given him. He changed his tone when he caught her up ; he intreated her to pardon his brutality, alleging that he had been half maddened by the thought of her belonging to another man ; he swore that if she would only trust him he would prove himself worthy of her love. But to none of his words did Chris vouchsafe the slightest notice ; and so they walked on, he pleading and protesting and she looking straight before her,

until they reached the high road, when he suddenly seized her hand, thus forcing her to halt.

It was in this attitude that Gerald Severne, who was sauntering slowly up from the station, with his hands behind his back and his head bent, discovered the pair. He started and stood still for one moment ; then quickened his pace and passed on, without raising his hat. There are circumstances under which people prefer not to be recognised, and doubtless he remembered that he had once before been too ready to intrude upon Miss Compton and her present companion.

But Chris, who quite understood what his thoughts were, could not endure to be again so misjudged. Moreover, she was furiously angry with Val, and was beginning to be just a little bit frightened. Therefore she pocketed her pride, and called out, " Mr. Severne ! " And as Gerald paused irresolutely, seeming doubtful whether to believe his ears or not, she repeated her summons in a louder key.

Upon that he turned, and advanced towards her, saying, with a rather forced smile, " Oh—how do you do, Miss Compton ? " as though there had been nothing particularly strange in her standing in the middle of the road with an agitated young man clinging to her hand.

" How do you do ? " returned Chris. " Will

you make Mr. Richardson go away, please? I want to get rid of him, and I can't."

Gerald endeavoured not to look surprised. He stepped up to Val's side, and said quietly, "You hear that Miss Compton wishes to get rid of you. I dare say you will prefer to go without making a disturbance."

Of the two men Gerald was somewhat the more powerfully built; but there was no such disparity of strength between them as to render the result of a tussle certain; and for one moment Val, though he relinquished the lady's hand, looked as though he might be inclined to show fight before submitting to her behests. However, he thought better of a line of action which would have put him altogether in the wrong, and replied: "Certainly, I am quite willing to go away, and I should have done so if Miss Compton had simply stated her wishes, without calling in assistance. Perhaps I may be excused for not having at once understood Miss Compton's wishes, which seem to have undergone a curious change since she and I last had the honour of meeting you. If I am not mistaken, it was you whom she wished to get rid of then; and in her anxiety to dismiss you, I remember that she took what I thought the somewhat imprudent step of telling you that she had fled to Paris to join me."

"I never said that, and you know that I did not!" cried Chris. "I said I had run away from my aunt's house."

"Mr. Severne must draw his own conclusions," observed Val, with a smile.

"I have no wish to pry into anything that doesn't concern me," Gerald declared. "All I know is that Miss Compton has asked me to make you go away. For the second time, will you be good enough to go?"

Val looked down at the ground, drew some semicircles in the dust with his stick, and pondered. When he opened his lips, it was to make perhaps the most foolish speech that he had ever given utterance to in a life which had been full of folly.

"Mr. Severne," said he, "I don't know what account Miss Compton may have been pleased to give you of her relations with me; but you can hardly require to be told that it is in my power to make things very unpleasant for you both, if I choose to speak out. Do you understand?"

"Not in the least," answered Gerald.

"Well, then, to put matters quite plainly, I presume that you are either engaged or about to be engaged to Miss Compton. One is sorry to seem greedy, but necessity has no law, and I am very hard up. For five thousand pounds,

payable on your wedding-day, I will undertake to hold my tongue about the past. All things considered, that can scarcely be called an exorbitant demand?"

"My good man," answered Gerald calmly, "you are under a complete misapprehension. I have no such privileges as you are kind enough to attribute to me, and if I had, I should at once proceed to hit you in the face for your impudence in attempting to levy blackmail. I don't know whether it is worth while to mention that I don't believe a word of what you have said or hinted at; but you are welcome to that information. Now be off."

"As you please," answered Val. "I have made you a fair offer; it isn't my fault if you think you can afford to reject it." Thereupon he made a low bow, turned on his heel and walked away.

And that was the last that Chris ever saw or heard of him. Possibly he was something of a coward; possibly he was not altogether a villain: whatever the cause of his surrender may have been, it was final and complete; nor has he reappeared in England from that day to this. It is not improbable that his handsome face may have won a Spanish bride for him, and it is tolerably certain that, if that be so, his wife has brought him a substantial dowry.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

WHEN Chris and Gerald Severne were left standing together on the road, they both became conscious of a certain embarrassment and of a difficulty in discovering what to say next. Chris, for her part, was a little ashamed of having appealed for aid against so pusillanimous an assailant ; moreover, she was not free from a painful doubt as to whether her motives might not have been misinterpreted.

To exculpate herself, she said at length : " I was really frightened when you came up. I didn't think he would leave me unless somebody made him ; so, as I recognised you, I called out. I should have called out to any other Englishman whom I had seen passing."

" I am very glad that I happened to be the one," remarked Gerald, " and I am sure you were quite right to call me, Miss Compton. He would certainly have tried to frighten you

more if you hadn't; and of course you were quite helpless in a lonely road like this and with night coming on. Perhaps," he added diffidently, "you will allow me to see you home now."

"Oh, no, thank you," answered Chris laughing; "that is not necessary. I am not likely to encounter any more Mr. Richardsons."

"No; but it is getting rather dark, and perhaps you have some distance to go."

"Scarcely more than a stone's throw. I am quite accustomed to walking about by myself, and I would much rather that you didn't go out of your way, please. Good-night, Mr. Severne."

Gerald hesitated. "Of course, if you object to my company——" he began.

"Oh, it isn't that. Well, then, yes; to be honest, I should rather object to your company just at present. After such horrid and untrue things have been said about us we couldn't talk with any comfort, could we? Very likely we shall meet again before you leave Cannes, and then perhaps we shall have had time to forget them."

"I am very sorry that they were said, and—still more sorry that some of them were untrue," replied Gerald; "but we needn't talk about

them. I hope you will allow an old friend to congratulate you upon having freed yourself from that fellow. I have heard of him from my father, who came across him at a good many race-meetings last autumn, and I knew he was a baddish lot, though I didn't suppose him to be such an utter scoundrel as he seems to be. However I hope you won't be troubled with him any more."

Chris was not sure that she altogether liked this paternal tone, though it set her more at her ease, as possibly it may have been intended to do. She did not at once move away, but stood where she was, arranging the stones on the road in patterns with the tip of her sunshade for a second or two. "I suppose," she resumed presently, "you did believe that I had gone to Paris to meet him."

"Well—you almost told me so. At least, I was stupid enough to think you did."

"But you don't believe it now?"

"Of course I don't; and I am not in the least surprised at your having bolted from that old aunt of yours. A more unattractive old woman I never came across. What a house too! I can't imagine your living in such a house."

"Oh, that was nothing," said Chris. "I

could have put up with the house, and with Aunt Rebecca too ; but——did you hear about Peter ? ”

Mr. Severne had not heard of the tragedy referred to, and when he was told of it he was as indignant as Chris could have wished him to be. “ The old beast ! ” he exclaimed ; and he declined to withdraw that strong expression, even when he was reminded that the lady of whom he spoke was dead. “ I don’t see why that should make any difference,” he declared. “ One doesn’t speak tenderly of Burke and Hare, although they are no more. I hope, for her sake, that she repented before she died ; but no amount of repentance could undo what she had done.”

“ Do you know,” said Chris, “ that is just what I feel. She did repent in a sort of a way, I believe, and most people would think that she had made ample amends by leaving me all her money ; but it wasn’t me whom she killed, you see. I think I have forgiven her, so far as I am concerned ; only I am not grateful to her, and I can’t pretend to be, for all this money, which she had to leave behind her, and which I didn’t particularly want. Do you think I ought to be grateful ? ”

By this time Chris had resumed her home-

ward march, and Gerald was walking beside her without let or hindrance. She had perhaps forgotten that she had begun by refusing his escort: at any rate, she did not intend to be alone with him again, and she wanted to have some pleasant memories of their last private interview to think over in the lonely years that were coming.

"I don't think you have much to thank your aunt for," was his answer to her question. "As you say, she couldn't take her money with her, and I dare say you wouldn't have considered yourself ill-used if she had left it to somebody else."

"I almost wish she had," sighed Chris. "Everybody gains something by being rich, I suppose, but it seems to me that I gain less by it than the generality of people would, and it has its disadvantages. It makes one ungenerous and suspicious, I think. The moment that I saw Mr. Richardson I suspected that he had heard of my inheritance, and that that was why he had sought me out after I had told him that I did not wish ever to see him again. In his case I was right; but a few months ago I shouldn't have had such suspicions, and now I suppose I shall have them more or less about everybody to the end of my days."

Gerald remained silent for some time, and his heart grew heavy within him. As a matter of theory, he thought that there was no great harm in marrying a woman with money, that it was rather a clever thing to do than otherwise, that it was what lots of fellows did, and what one's people expected of one, and so forth ; but, illogically enough, he was of opinion that the case was very different if you happened to be in love with the woman who possessed the money. He had been more than willing to marry Chris in the days of her poverty ; but when he found out why he had been summoned to Cannes, he was at once attacked by scruples which to his mother would have seemed as incomprehensible as they were ridiculous. He had not imparted these scruples to his mother ; but he had brooded over them all day at Monte Carlo, and the conclusion to which he had come was that, even if Miss Compton should prove to be free, it would be extremely difficult for him to avow his love to her, and still more difficult to get her to believe in it. She would believe, no doubt, that he had been to some extent in love with her at Brentstow ; for indeed she had been as good as turned out of the house on that very account. But the fact remained that he had kept his sentiments to himself ever since ; and

how was she to know that he had called in Balaclava Terrace for the purpose of declaring them ?

Here therefore were two people who were deeply in love with one another, yet each of whom was persuaded, or very nearly so, that they must part. As there was no adequate cause for their parting, and as certain resolute persons in the neighbourhood did not intend to let them do any such thing, the situation was scarcely as serious as they imagined it to be. Still it is probable that they would have taken leave of each other that evening in a very formal and distant fashion but for the trifling circumstance that, just as she was nearing the entrance to Dr. Lavergne's villa, Chris trod upon a loose stone. She missed her footing, and would have fallen flat upon her face if Gerald had not caught her ; and, somehow or other, when Gerald found her in his arms he did not let her go again.

After that there was not much use in saying, " I can't and I won't ;" but Chris used these expressions, as well as a good many others to the like effect, and as she was a very honest person, one can only assume that she thought she was speaking sincerely.

" It is all very fine for you to grumble."

remarked Gerald, when she had pointed out to him what a dreadfully humiliating thing it would be for her to be welcomed by his family after having been previously dismissed; "but if I were as proud as you are, it seems to me that I might make out a more substantial grievance. Could any unprejudiced person doubt that I shrank from sharing your poverty and that I have jumped at the chance of sharing your riches? And do you suppose that I shall enjoy having that sort of thing said about me by unprejudiced persons?"

"*Il n'y a que la vérité qui blesse,*" returned Chris; "I really don't think one need care very much about the calumnies of what you call 'unprejudiced persons.' I, at all events, believe whatever you tell me."

Having extorted this admission, Gerald had little difficulty in showing her that she had cut the ground from under her own feet, and had better consent to be happy, notwithstanding the affection which her future mother-in-law was ready to lavish upon her.

There is no rose without a thorn; but there are a great many thorns without roses. This was the text of a little homily preached to Chris by Dr. Lavergne that same evening.

"Dear mademoiselle," said he, "you are

going to marry the man whom you love, and that is everything. When you are married to him you will not be in Paradise, because there is no Paradise on the surface of the planet which we inhabit ; but you will have obtained the best that this world can give you. Miladi Barnstaple will rub her hands ; a sour old French doctor will permit himself to laugh a little in his sleeve perhaps ; but what of that ? The laugh is on your side, and we know it. You can very well afford to let others call your husband a fortune-hunter, so long as you yourself are convinced that he is nothing of the kind. Nevertheless, I should be giving the lie to all my experience and knowledge of the world if I did not counsel you to have your money settled upon yourself."

It is not very likely that Chris would have acted upon this sound advice if she had been free to follow her own inclinations ; but as she had a cousin and guardian who was well acquainted with the wicked ways of men, her interests were in no danger of being neglected ; and it was creditable to Gerald Severne, as well as sensible on his part, that he declined to give up his profession and live upon his wife's income.

They have for some time past been installed

in a pretty little detached house near the Champs Elysées, and are acquiring an increasing reputation as the givers of remarkably perfect little dinners. This distinction is, no doubt, due to the fact that they possess an excellent *chef*; it cannot be in any way attributed to the management of their housekeeper, a very inefficient but most alarming personage, who is known and dreaded by the other domestics under the name of Mrs. Stubbs, but whom her mistress is wont to address as Martha.

"Wages not so much a hobject as a respectable 'ome," says Martha; "and my dooty it is to see that money carefully saved shall not be stolen nor yet thrown away by a pack of lazy furrin servants as ain't got a vestige of what I call principle among the lot of 'em."

Mr. Severne, being something of a dog-fancier, has several prize-winners in his establishment, but Mrs. Severne has none of her own. Shortly after she entered into possession of her new home a suspicious looking packing-case was forwarded to her from England which was only got through the custom-house unopened by means of pressure exerted in the highest quarters. This case was subsequently interred in the garden, and over it was erected a small

marble tablet, which bears the inscription of "PETER, the faithful and attached friend of Christina Severne."

Ere long the house which Christina Severne now inhabits will pass into other hands; the little marble slab will be laughed at, will be the subject of some idle conjectures, will be torn up, perhaps, and Peter's ashes scattered to the winds. It is the fate of dogs and men alike. Tenants for life, we have neither part nor lot in this world from the moment that we cease to breathe its air, and all we can do is to behave ourselves as well as we can for the little time that we are here, in the hope of better things to come. There is every reason to believe that Mr. and Mrs. Gerald Severne will behave themselves quite as well as the rest of us and no reason to doubt that they will be forgotten quite as soon after their death. Meanwhile they are popular people.

THE END.









